

SUPER BOWL PICK: RAVENS VS. SEAHAWKS

NFL '15 PREVIEW

THE
BACKS
COME BACK

BY ANDY BENOIT
P. 56

THE
RECEIVER
REVOLUTION

BY AUSTIN MURPHY
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DOUBLE ISSUE

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PAGES
OF SCOUTING
REPORTS

THE HEALER
RUSSELL WILSON

HOW THE SEAHAWKS GOT PAST SUPER BOWL XLIX

BY GREG BISHOP P. 62

SEPTEMBER 7, 2015
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Star players imagine themselves in different positions

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How a tropical trip helped the Super Bowl losers settle their beefs and say Aloha to 'Hawkwardness' **By Greg Bishop**

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When it comes to the most fundamental stat in football, the NFL is absurdly oblivious **By Michael McKnight**

TERRANCE KNIGHTON, Redskins NT

... But what if he were a kicker?

"We give kickers a lot of crap in the locker room, but there may not be a position that has more pressure. I think I'd embrace that pressure."

Photograph by **Simon Bruty** for Sports Illustrated (Knighton), Aaron Doster/USA TODAY Sports (Background); Photo Illustration by SI Premedia

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The euphony of NFL names

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SI.COM

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2 What If?

The loss of Astros outfielder J.D. Martinez in 2014 had their GM Jeff Luhnow thinking what could have been

3 U.S. Open Crystal Ball

SI's tennis experts discuss this year's top tennis storylines and predict the winners for the Open

4 Season of the Storm

A look at how Tulane's football program returned to action after a season interrupted by Hurricane Katrina

5 How sports helped a city heal

Examining what role sports played in New Orleans's recovery

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Digital Bonus



Manchild in the NBA

From the SI Vault
April 11, 1988

Did **Darryl Dawkins**, Sir Slam, fail to live up to the great expectations of his fans and his coaches? A former NBA coach searches for the answer

By **Dave Wohl**

To read this and other stories from the **SPORTS ILLUSTRATED** archive, go to **SI.com/vault**

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LEATHER AND RACE

Fashion's latest "It Girl" SYLWIA ZAPORA joins the Le Mans GTE-Am champion ANDREA BERTOLINI on the racetracks of Balocco, Italy in the Maserati MC12. It's a showdown of beauty, racing and fashion that only Maserati can win.

Photographed by Anders Overgaard Supported by INGLOT Cosmetics



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The Maserati and Zegna teams introduced the first ever silk interiors for cars, crafted with premium Italian leather, in the **2016 Maserati Quattroporte** and **Maserati Ghibli**. Each is custom made in Italy with its owner's name stitched on the sun visor.





LEADING OFF

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Photo Illustrations by
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TRADING

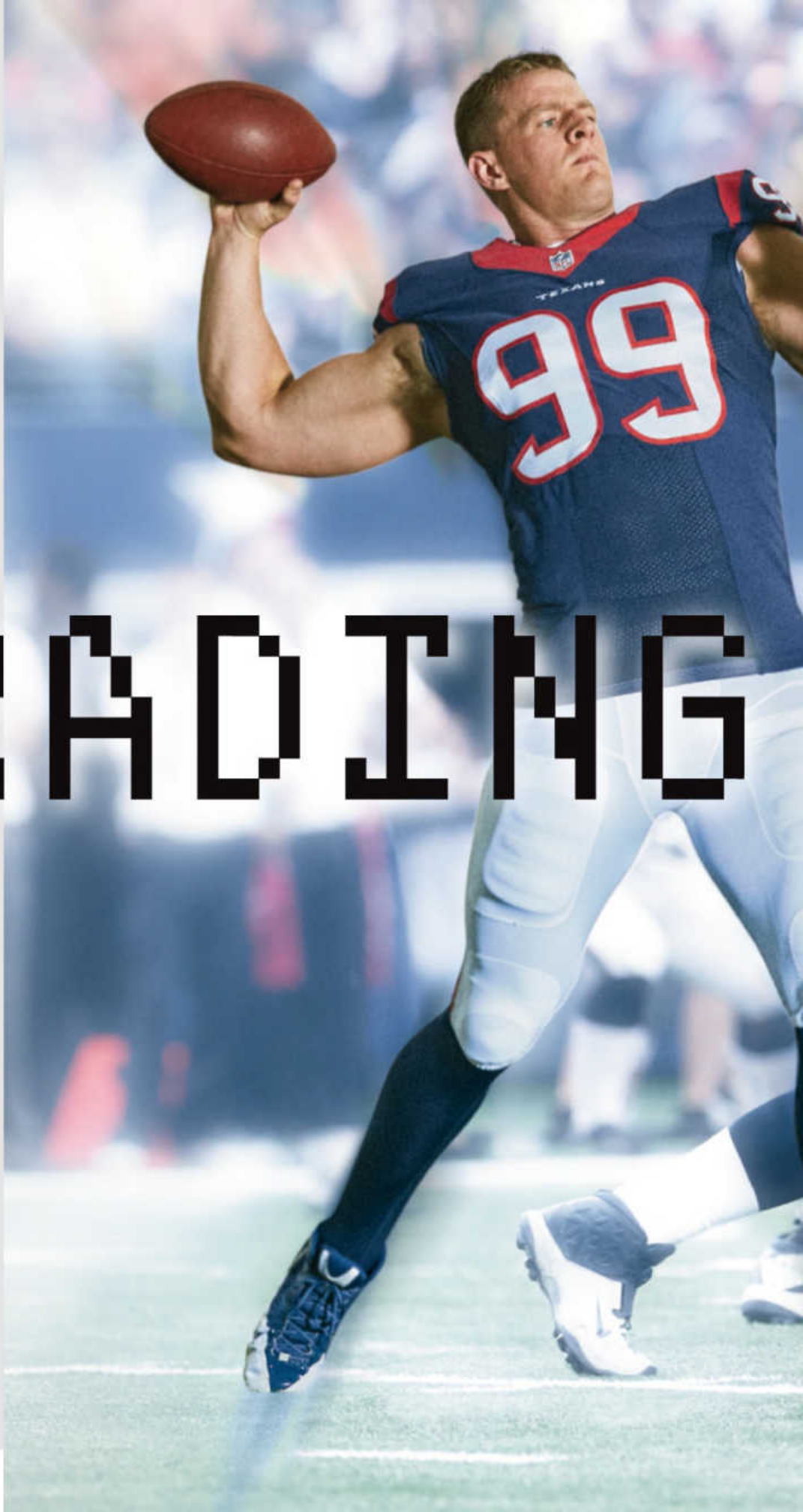
J.J. WATT *Texans DE*
... But what if he were
a **quarterback**?

"I think deep down everyone wants to be the quarterback. That's the position with the single most control over the game. He gets the most touches and can make the most impact. He's a game-changer. I played QB up until my junior year of high school, and while I like to think I could play that position in the NFL, there's no way. QBs in this league are not only insanely smart, but they have incredible technique, incredible arm strength. But it's fun to pretend."

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SEPTEMBER 7, 2015

ROBERT SEALE FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (WATT); GREG NELSON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (BACKGROUND)





PLACES

J.J. WATT HAS BAGGED PLENTY OF QUARTERBACKS—
BUT WHAT IF HE *BECAME* ONE? AND WHAT IF ONE OF
THE GAME'S BEST QBs WERE BREAKING UP PASSES,
NOT THROWING THEM? SI ASKED SOME OF FOOTBALL'S
BIGGEST (LITERALLY AND FIGURATIVELY) STARS
WHERE THEY MIGHT PLAY IN THE BIZARRO NFL

BY GREG BISHOP AND EMILY KAPLAN



LEADING OFF

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< MARIO WILLIAMS

Bills DE

... But what if he were a **wide receiver**?

"I'd be the type of wideout who would go deep and across the middle—that's where all the physical stuff goes on. I have the size, speed and ability to separate from a defender. My touchdown dance? I'd put the ball down and get right back to the huddle. Act like you've been there before.... The coaches have never really said anything about [playing me at receiver], but with Coach Rex, who knows what could happen."

JOE THOMAS

Browns OT

... But what if he were a **punter**?

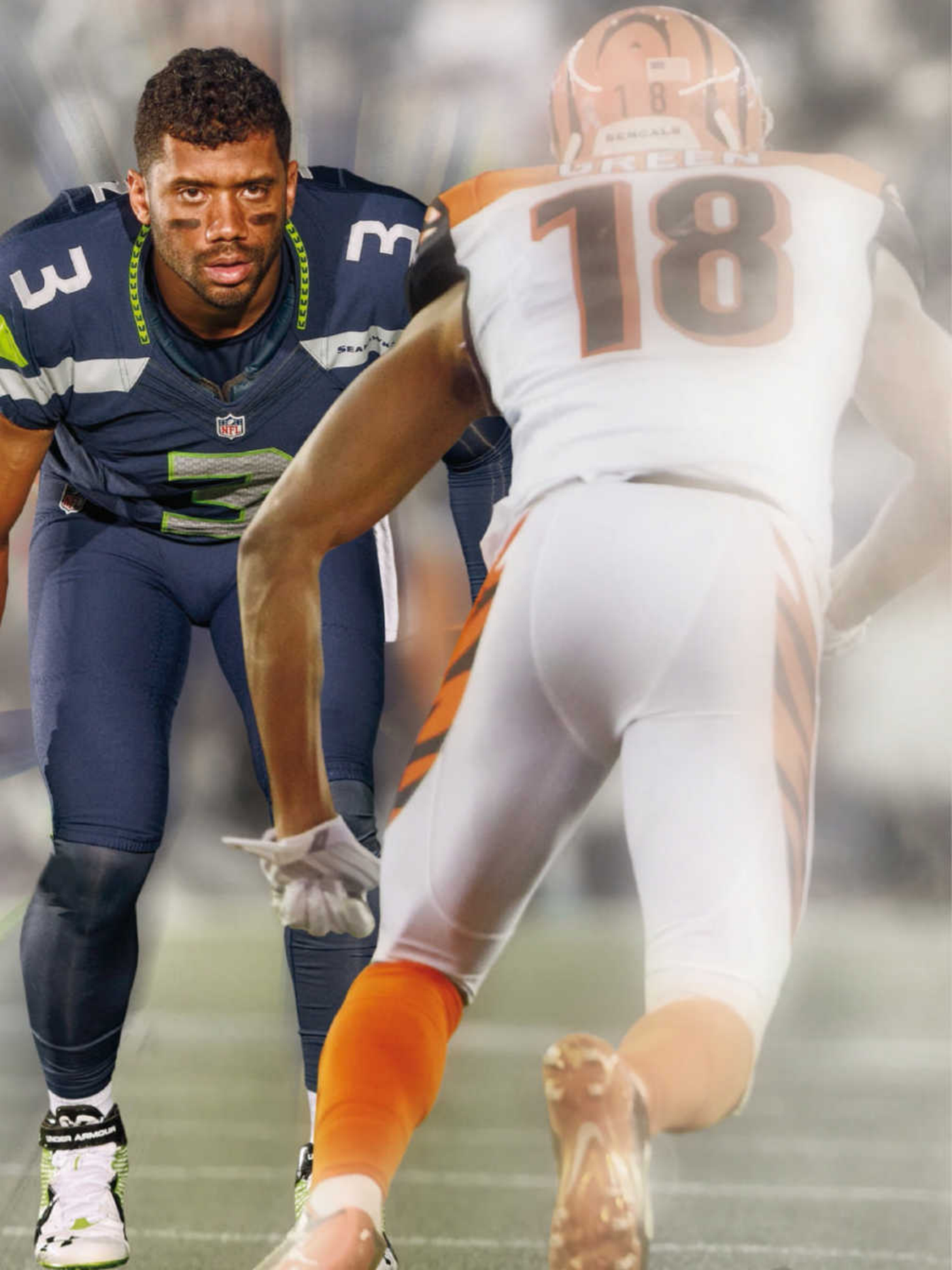
"My dad was a punter, and I punted in high school. We had a park in my backyard growing up in Wisconsin, and instead of throwing balls back and forth like most fathers and sons do, we would punt back and forth. I miss doing that. I know my body will give out eventually, being an offensive lineman, but I'll bet that if I really committed to it, I could be a punter in the NFL. Wouldn't that be a funny story?"

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COTY TARR FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (WILLIAMS); PHELAN M. EBENHACK/AP (BACKGROUND); FRED VUICH FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (THOMAS); SCOTT TERNA/CSM (BACKGROUND)







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RUSSELL WILSON

Seahawks QB

... But what if he were a **cornerback**?

"I played corner in high school. I'd be just like that, a physical corner. I'd try to catch you at the line. Lot of press coverage. I think my skills would translate well: I'm shifty, and when you play corner, you have to be able to turn your hips. ... A.J. Green? I don't think I'd be able to lock him down. ... I never wanted to be anything other than a quarterback. But I have a lot of respect for the corners in our league. It's one of the hardest positions to play in football."

TRAVIS KELCE

Chiefs TE

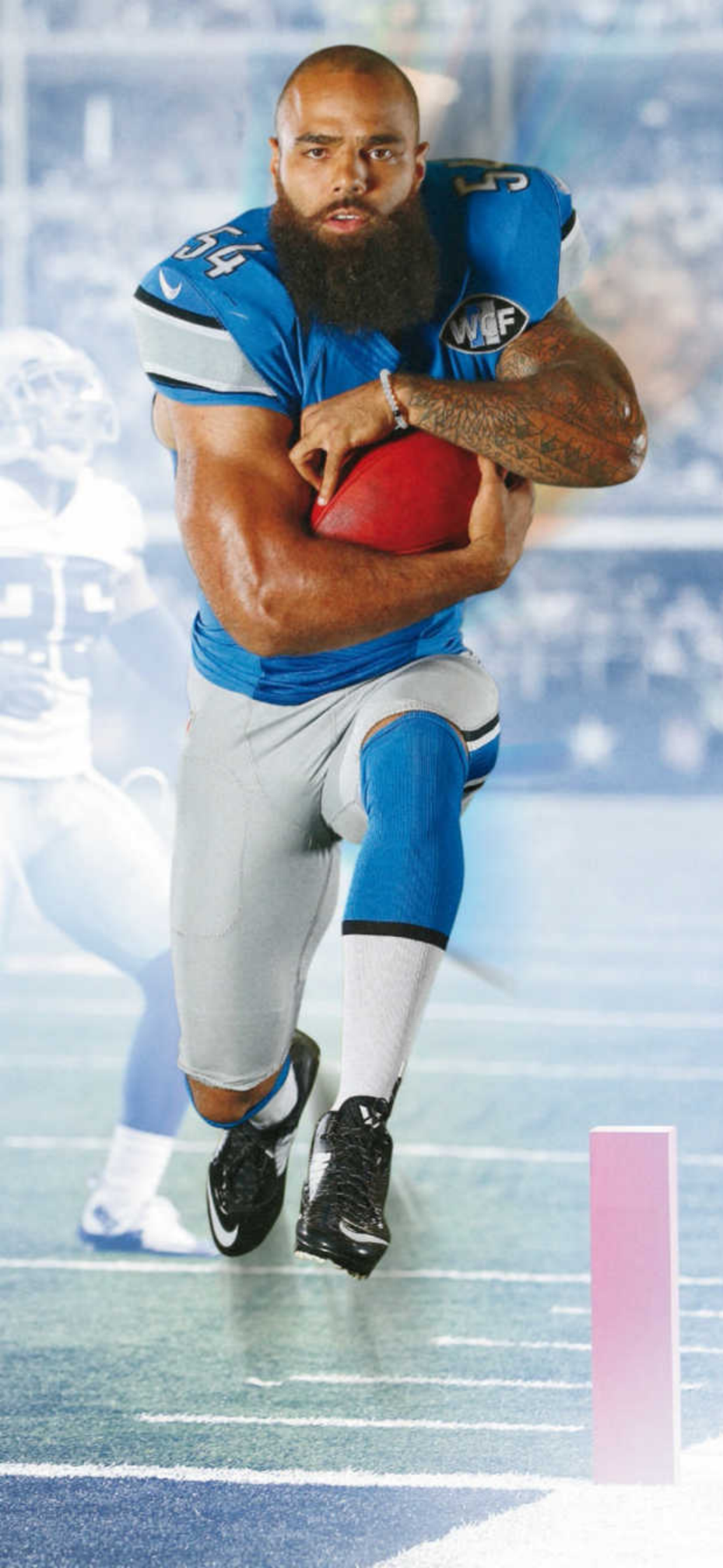
... But what if he were a **quarterback**?

"I played quarterback my first year of college [at Cincinnati] and switched to tight end before my junior year. I miss being back there, slinging the ball, being that guy everyone can count on for every single play. Once you get to the pros, you leave everything in the past. There's no storytelling about what you used to do. Now you're with the cream of the crop. I'm a tight end now."

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DEANDRE LEVY

Lions MLB

... But what if he were a **running back**?

"It's the most parallel position to linebacker. You bang every play, find the running lane and hit or get hit. It's all about physicality. I played running back in Pop Warner growing up in Wisconsin, and I was probably the most dominant back in all of the Midwest. If I played running back in the NFL, my speed and power would be unmatched. Just give me a year of training and I can do it."

JEREMY HILL

Bengals RB

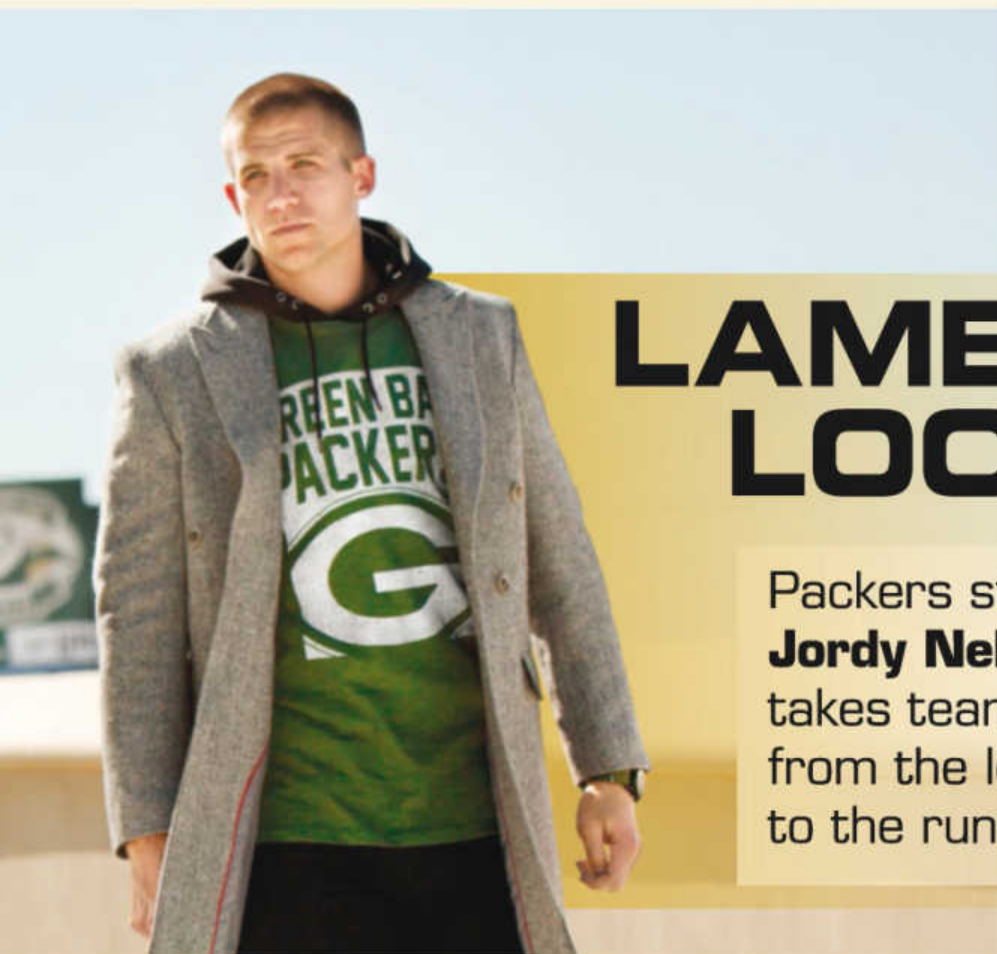
... But what if he were a **linebacker**?

"I actually played defensive end in my youth league. I'd like to think I was pretty good, but obviously my coaches thought I'd be a better running back. If I played defensive end in the NFL, I'd have to use my quickness. I'd likely be a speed-rusher-type of guy. But to be honest, there's no way I could play defensive end in today's NFL. Maybe outside linebacker, that's somewhere I could use my speed and creativity, but I'm just not big enough to be the guy on the front line."

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LAMBEAU LOOKS

Packers star
Jordy Nelson
takes team apparel
from the locker room
to the runway.

GREEN BAY PACKERS Pro Bowl receiver Jordy Nelson excels at catching passes at Lambeau Field, no matter the elements. But on a hot day in July, outside the stadium and out of uniform for a photo shoot, Nelson was the center of attention off the field. "It was a good time, besides the fact that I was wearing six layers," he jokes. "Fall and winter clothes, done in the middle of summer."

Nelson was sporting the NFL's refreshed line of apparel for the shoot, rocking team-inspired looks that are versatile enough for gameday, the workday or happy hour. He smoothly managed a suite of outfits, from a heringbone topcoat paired with a vintage-style Packers sweater to a pinstripe sports jacket over a Packers ringer T-shirt. Although his season was cut short, he's still part of a rising group of players making names for themselves with their play and their sense of style.

These ripped-from-the-runway looks fit with Nelson's personal evolution. The soft-spoken star grew up on a Kansas farm, wearing loose jeans and T-shirts while handling chores. At Kansas State, Nelson stuck to sweatpants in class and at the stadium. Once he reached the NFL, he knew his wardrobe had to shift. "I've changed my style a lot from when I came here as a rookie," he says. "It's being more professional and looking good while I'm at work, or traveling or making appearances. Now that I'm 30, I don't get dressed like a high schooler anymore."

That means tailored suits on the road, tight jeans and button-downs for home games, and stylish Packers gear everywhere else. Nelson loves to look good but admits he does not like to shop, so having a team of stylists and menswear experts on set was a dream.

Nelson was so inspired by his modeling looks that he is trying to track down some of the jackets he wore during the shoot, though he will still enlist his usual personal shopper: his wife, Emily. "My wife went shopping the other day and brought home five bags of clothes for me," he says, laughing. "I try it on and say yea or nay, and then move on."

Off the field, he makes sure to represent his Packers as much as he can. He often favors a Packers three-quarter zip-up sweater for appearances—comfortable but not restrictive. But his No. 1 item? The stocking cap. "Especially up here in Wisconsin, it's very valuable as an accessory," he says. Nelson prefers the throwback style, which stands out a little more than the standard Packers green and evokes some of the organization's long and storied lore.

"The history around here is amazing," he says. "We see it every day. The pictures of the former players, the Hall of Famers, the retired numbers. It's a blessing to be a part of it." And, of course, to have that history influence his fashion sense. —**Evan Scott Schwartz**



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JORDY NELSON
GREEN BAY PACKERS

INBOX

FOR AUG. 24, 2015

Great article on the Sky's **Elena Delle Donne**. The WNBA does not get the respect it deserves. These women work just as hard, if not harder, than the men. I love watching the women's game because it stresses fundamentals.

Bill Leppert, Greenwood, Ind.



I really enjoyed Emily Kaplan's article on Ravens offensive lineman **John Urschel**. It debunks stereotypes that many have about football players and encourages those who excel in both academics and sports to follow their dreams.

Derek Maxwell, Prather, Calif.

Your article on the mathlete made me think of former Browns quarterback Frank Ryan, who earned a Ph.D. in mathematics from Rice University in 1965 while he was still playing in the NFL. How great would it be to see Ryan and John Urschel sit down to shoot the breeze about mathematics?

Jim Leimbach, Atlanta



I liked your article on **Jason Day's** PGA Championship win, but it should have mentioned one of the tournament's most unusual shots: Matt Jones's third-round, 9th hole drive that landed on the second-floor deck of a hospitality tent adjacent to the fairway. Jones's recovery shot was good enough to save bogey and retain a temporary one-shot lead over Day.

Elmer R. Umbenhauer, Cape May Court House, N.J.



COVER

Ben Reiter's **Cardinals** cover story acknowledged the losses of Adam Wainwright, Matt Holliday and Matt Adams but omitted the Cards' toughest loss of all: the tragic death of Oscar Taveras last October.

Jerry Donovan
Douglas, Mich.



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POINT AFTER

I'd like to offer an addition to **Steve Rushin's** "Dating Game" essay: April 15. It might be both the best and worst day in sports. It's the day Jackie Robinson made his major league debut in 1947 and the day of the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013.

Rich Foley
Fayette, Ohio

Aug. 16 could have easily qualified for Rushin's "Dating Game." It's the day when both Babe Ruth ('48) and Elvis ('77) left this world and when Madonna ('58) entered it.

Greg Harris, Atlanta

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SCORECARD

Thunderous

The impact of Darryl Dawkins, a true original and Planet Lovetron's favorite son, extended far beyond his backboard-breaking dunks

BY ALEXANDER WOLFF

IT MAY BE impossible to enlarge someone who stood 6' 11" and weighed 252 pounds, but in the case of Darryl Dawkins, it's worth a try. That's because Chocolate Thunder, who died of a heart attack last Thursday at age 58, begs to be put in a context that would never have occurred to us in 1975 when Philadelphia drafted him, at 18, out of Orlando's Evans High with the No. 5 pick.

By the time he retired from the league in 1989, after playing for four teams, the man also known as Double D—or Sir Slam, or Dr. Dunkenstein, depending on how the stars

aligned with the planet Lovetron, from which he said he came—was many things. He was the jovial big man before Shaquille O'Neal. He was the bard of the outrageous utterance before Charles Barkley. He was the bling-is-the-thing Philadelphia 76er before Allen Iverson. And he was the over-the-top dandy—the day he signed his first contract with the Sixers, he wore a red suit and top hat—before anyone heard of the NBA draft green room.

Dawkins compelled you to watch him play because, when you did, you couldn't help but take the measure of how good he might someday be. Every time he attacked the basket to dunk



was a promise spoken; every time he settled for that fadeaway jumper was a promise broken. “There were times when he teased us with a hint of how he could dominate a game,” wrote one of his coaches, Dave Wohl, in these pages in 1988. “And we went home in awe and yet sad because we knew of no spell to make it happen more frequently. But few players could make us feel that way even once.”

Dawkins defiantly lugged his adolescence with him. He wore a single stud earring, spoke of a spouse back on Lovetron named Juicy Lucy and told of off-seasons practicing “interplanetary funkmanship.” But a sweet innocence was impossible to miss. Dawkins’s epitaph will be, as he once said, ALL THE LADIES ARE INVITED.

It wasn’t enough to nickname himself, even if Dawkins did, often (though it was Stevie Wonder who hung Chocolate Thunder on him). He also branded every dunk in his repertoire, from the Look Out Below to the Cover Your Head; from the Go-Rilla to the Yo-Mama; from the Rim Wrecker to the Spine-Chiller Supreme; from the In-Your-Face Disgrace to the Greyhound Special, which involved Dawkins’s collecting a rebound, rumbling coast-to-coast and consummating matters himself.

But Double D’s most purplish coinages came in 1979, after he shattered a couple of backboards. On Nov. 13, he rained down shards of glass

on the Kansas City Kings’ Bill Robinzine with the If-You-Ain’t-Groovin’-Best-Get-Movin’, Chocolate-Thunder-Flyin’, Robinzine-Cryin’, Teeth-Shakin’, Glass-Breakin’, Rump-Roastin’, Bun-Toastin’, Glass-Still-Flyin’, Wham-Bam-I-Am Jam. Then, on Dec. 5 against the Spurs, he obliged the home folks with an encore: the Chocolate-Thunder-Ain’t-Playin’, Get-Out-of-the-Wayin’, Backboard-Swayin’, Game-Delayin’ Super Spike.

All of which made him, when the NBA introduced the breakaway rim for the 1981–82 season, one big mother of invention. That he never entirely became the dominant post player his coaches hoped—he finished his career with averages of 12.0 points and 6.1 rebounds—made his later-in-life gigs leading minor league and junior college teams an ironic vocational turn. Yet even then he showed his way with people, insisting that players perform community service and, at Pennsylvania’s Lehigh Carbon Community College, show up to cheer for fellow students who played other sports.

Last week, after Dawkins slipped the surly bonds of Lovetron, the headline in the *Philadelphia Daily News* read WE’RE SHATTERED. They’re apt words. The man had generated such goodwill that all of us drawn to him served, throughout his many teasings and nonstop entertainments, as part of Chocolate Thunder’s own, larger backboard. □



NHL

+

Al Arbour

1932–2015

THE NEW YORK ISLANDERS’ move

from Long Island to their new home in Brooklyn starting this season is painful for many of their fans, but it was

made even more emotional last week by the death of Al Arbour at age 82. The Hall of Fame coach was a beloved institution behind the team’s bench from 1973 to ’86 and ’88 to ’94. In 2007, at 75, he came out of retirement to guide the Isles for one last game, his 1,500th—a league record with a single franchise. (The Islanders won that game, of course.)

Arbour’s longevity was as remarkable as his achievements: four straight Stanley Cups (1980–83) and 19 consecutive playoff series victories, neither of which are likely to be matched in the salary-cap era. His 782 career wins (he also coached St. Louis from 1970 to ’73) rank second all time behind Scotty Bowman, one of the coaching greats Arbour played for and learned from during 14 seasons as a defenseman with four teams. The last player to wear glasses on the ice, “Radar,” as he was nicknamed, was tough and smart, and he played on five Cup-winning teams.

A brilliant tactician and commanding presence, with a warm, engaging side, Arbour really knew his players and how to motivate them. He brought out their best and earned their complete trust. “We never questioned him,” says former Islanders forward Butch Goring. “There was no doubt in anyone’s mind that he was doing the right thing.”

During Arbour’s final years many of his old players traveled to Sarasota, Fla., to visit him at the retirement home where he lived as he battled Parkinson’s disease and dementia. “What coach commands that kind of respect?” says Goring. “He was such an influence. I’ve lost a friend.”

—John Rolfé

A SEASON WITH NOTRE DAME FOOTBALL



—THE FIGHTING IRISH—

IT'S MORE THAN JUST A GAME

SERIES PREMIERE

TUESDAY 10PM

FOLLOWING INSIDE THE NFL





NFL

+

Hollywood Tackles Brain Injuries Head-On

An ex-NFL star dealing with cognitive impairment weighs in on an upcoming film

IN 2013 FORMER

Giants defensive end Leonard Marshall was diagnosed with cognitive impairment believed to be the result of his years playing football. On Christmas Day, *Concussion*, starring Will Smith, opens in theaters nationwide,

telling the story of pathologist Bennet Omalu, who discovered chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a disorder associated with dementia, during an autopsy of ex-Steeler Mike Webster. The 53-year-old Marshall, who is part of a class-action lawsuit against

the league and runs a charity called Brain Unity Trust, spoke to SI about the movie, his health and football's future.

What do you think the impact of this film will be?

It can bring information to others who may not know what's going on. It should be a really important movie that hopefully reaches a lot of people.

You've been quite open about your neurological issues. What is your daily struggle like?

I see the doctors as often as I can. I take the proper medications. I continue to exercise. The main thing is learning how to deal with stress and get your rest. You just always have to watch what you do and how you do it.

What will happen if a better job is not done educating players?

Guys will lose interest in playing this sport. Think about kids between 6' 3" and 6' 7". They're playing basketball instead of tight end or adding 60 pounds to play defensive end. If football is the sport it's supposed to be, some of them would be playing it instead of going to the NBA.

—Ben Baskin



SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

Real Madrid star **Cristiano Ronaldo** is reportedly paying \$30,000 for a life-sized wax figure of himself. There's one in a Madrid museum; the new one is for his home.

GO FIGURE

9

Days between games in which the Dodgers were no-hit: The Cubs' Jake Arrieta did it on Sunday, and Houston's Mike Fiers did so on Aug. 21. It's the fourth-shortest gap between no-nos for one team.

2

Holes in one by Brian Harman in the final round of The Barclays, making him the third PGA player ever with two aces in one round.

THEY SAID IT



"It doesn't end until it ends."

Junji Hidaka

Coach of Japan's Kitasuna Little League team on the advice he gave his players after they fell behind 10-2 to Lewisberry, Pa., in the first inning of Sunday's LLWS title game. Japan came back to win 18-11.

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TRAINING WITH

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Buc Starts Here

A tree (yes) and a dual workout helped make Lavonte David a star

ON A STRETCH of grass in front of the Fort Scott Community College campus in Fort Scott, Kans., stands a large, leafy oak known as Man Maker Force. All those who have played football for the Greyhounds—as fourth-year Tampa Bay Buccaneers linebacker Lavonte David did from 2008 to '09—know how the unassuming tree got its commanding nickname.

“The first day of camp we had a conditioning test—it was brutal,” says David of the repeated sets of 40-, 110- and 220-yard sprints around the tree. David didn’t finish in the allotted time, finally falling to the ground and telling a coach, “Please don’t cut me.”

They didn’t, but, says David, “I knew I couldn’t have that same outcome ever again, so I’m always making sure I’m in shape and ready to dominate whatever the coaches have planned.”

Following two years at Fort Scott and two more at Nebraska, David was selected by the Bucs in the second round of the 2012 NFL draft (*see page 156*). In the three seasons since, he’s the only player in the league to record 10 or more sacks and at least six interceptions. He was an All-Pro in 2013, and after finishing third in the league with 146 total tackles and tied for third with four forced fumbles last season, the 25-year-old David signed a five-year contract extension in early August worth \$50.25 million.

Tony Villani, David’s trainer for four years and the owner of XPE Sports in Boca Raton, Fla., credits David’s success to his pupil’s humble attitude and commitment to Villani’s unorthodox training strategy. “We agreed that to be one of the best linebackers in the league, you need to tackle with power and hit like a lineman, but you also



need to cover and move around in space like a D-back,” says Villani.

So Villani came up with a two-pronged approach: intersperse days of working with linemen (including the Pouncey brothers—the Dolphins’ Mike and the Steelers’ Maurkice) to boost strength and power, with days working alongside defensive backs and receivers (including the Chiefs’ Eric Berry and the 49ers’ Anquan Boldin) to improve speed and agility. Some sessions include explosive leg exercises, upper-body lifting and footwork drills over five to 10 yards, while others require David to focus on hip flexibility, longer sprints and changing directions.

“It’s about understanding what I’m going up against, who I am and what I can do to put myself in a greater position to make a play or be a better player,” says David. Now he’s the one proving to be a force.

—Jamie Lisanti

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Trainer Tony Villani’s patented SHREDmill—an adjustable, self-powered treadmill—allows him to tailor David’s workout for either strength and power or for speed and agility.

When running on the machine, the 233-pound David’s target is 16 mph, which is roughly what he’d need to chase tight ends and running backs in the open field. To work on his speed and stride length, David sprints at a 15% to 20% incline, doing roughly six sets of up to a dozen sprints of 25 to 40 yards. To enhance his power and quickness, he sprints at a 10% incline against 200 to 400 pounds of resistance in three- to five-second bursts.



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Grape Expectations

Ex-quarterbacks Dan Marino and Damon Huard are teammates again in a new game: making high-end wine. And this time Huard makes the calls.

**BY
BEN BASKIN**

Photographs by
Caylee Betts



+

A SERIES
FROM THE
EDITORS OF
FORTUNE
AND
Sports Illustrated

DAMON HUARD'S hands are stained a deep purple. His white polo shirt has two circular splotches of the same hue. For the past hour he has been drinking wine siphoned out of new \$1,500 French-oak barrels—just another day at the office.

"This is our little Napa," says Huard. It's late July,

another football season approaches, and the former NFL quarterback is surveying his new 5,300-square-foot winery outside Seattle with the look of a proud parent. "We're making a world-class 94-point wine," he says, "and we're doing it right here in a warehouse in Woodinville."

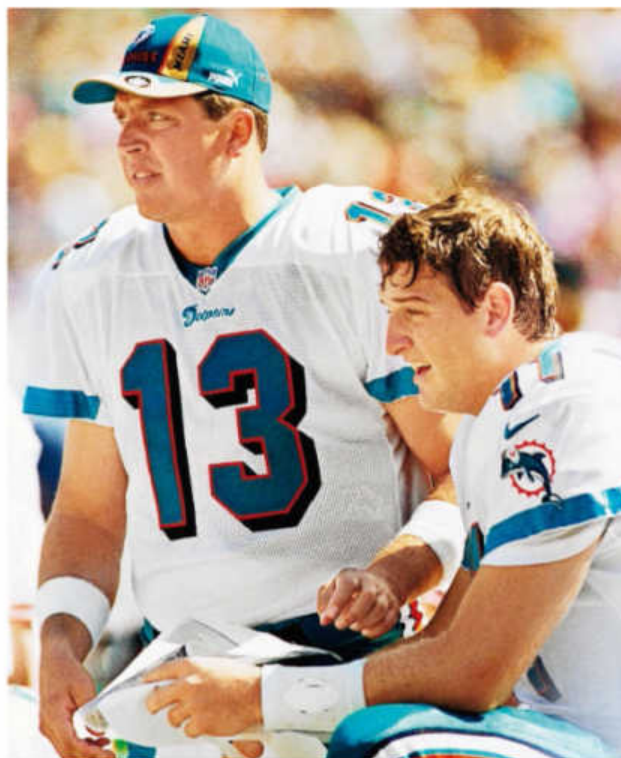
Woodinville is the home of Passing Time, the winery Huard launched in May 2014 with Dan Marino, the man he once backed up with the Dolphins. Marino, who started collecting wines shortly after he turned pro in 1983, served as something of a mentor and sommelier to Huard, who

joined the team as a rookie in '97. "I drank Bud Light or Captain Morgan and Coke," Huard says now. "But over my years with Dan, the wine bug just hit me."

By the time Huard arrived in Miami, the cellar in Marino's Fort Lauderdale home contained some of Washington's finest vintages. Huard grew up in Puyallup and graduated from Washington in 1996 as the Huskies' all-time leading passer, so he was intrigued. Years later, when he was studying the wine business, he even learned that his great-grandfather Nelson Huard was one of the state's first Concord grape growers.

And while Marino, who splits his time between Florida and Kiawah Island, S.C., brings celebrity and marketing muscle to the venture, it is Huard who runs the daily operation. On this day, that includes making a delivery at a hotel and chatting with a restaurant manager at lunch, which leads to a sale and Huard's promise that he'll return with six bottles.

Back at the winery, Huard samples his 2014 vintage. Each barrel bears a label with a seemingly random concatenation of letters and numbers. They correspond to different regions of Washington, specific vineyards and varietals, and the yeasts used in fermentation. Huard deciphers them as if he's reading from a play sheet on the sideline. "Ah, this is the fourth-leaf stuff from Champeux," he says.



"It has that floral essence, and the cocoa powder coats your mid-palette."

Huard takes a wine thief—similar to a turkey baster—and siphons some wine from the barrel into a glass. He swirls it and takes a sip.

"This is some good s---," he says.

DURING THEIR three seasons as Miami teammates, Huard and Marino often dreamed of starting their own winery. They'd sit in quarterback meetings and doodle in their playbooks, drawing different iterations of what they wanted their company name and logo to be. Rifle Arms came and went, along with many others. They eventually settled on Passing Time because it was subtle. They chose

"I drank Bud Light or Captain and Coke," Huard says of his early days in the NFL.

"But over my years with Dan, the wine bug just hit me."

Role Reversal

Marino (13 and far left) was the star in Miami, but it's Huard who runs the show at Passing Time.

not to put any references to their previous careers or their own names on the label, save for the laces of a football. "Is it laces?" Huard asks. "Or is it the markings of time?"

Marino retired in 2000, and while Huard kept playing until '09—including stops with the Patriots, Chiefs and 49ers, who cut him before that season started—he spent the last eight years of his career cultivating relationships in the Washington wine industry, becoming friends with farmers and vineyard owners. At times he'd pass along a Dan Marino-signed football.

In 2010, Huard, Marino and financial partners Doug Donnelly and Kevin Hughes combined to invest \$500,000 to start Passing Time. But they knew money wouldn't be enough, so they hired Chris Peterson, who had been billed as one of the best young winemakers in Washington.

Using both Huard and Peterson's connections, they sourced Cabernet Sauvignon grapes from three vineyards, plus some Merlot and Cabernet Franc for blending. When Peterson finished work on the first vintage in spring 2014, he had mixed news for Huard and Marino: They had 500 cases of really good

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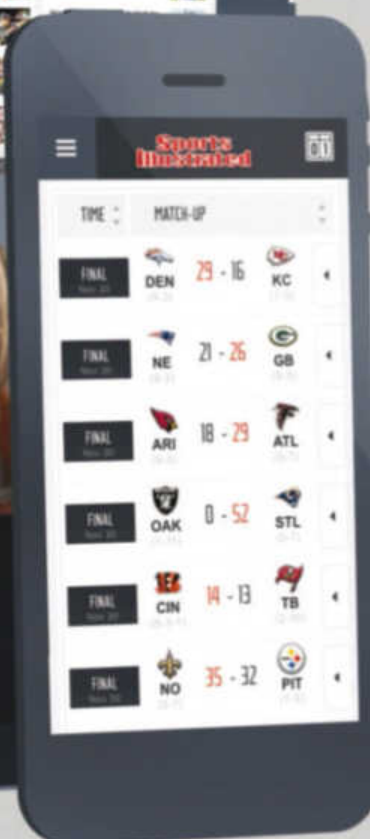
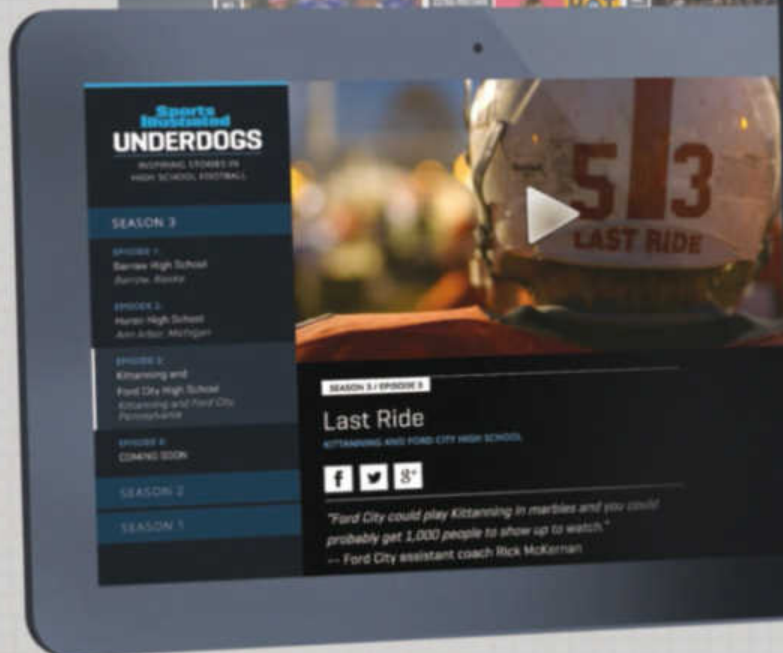
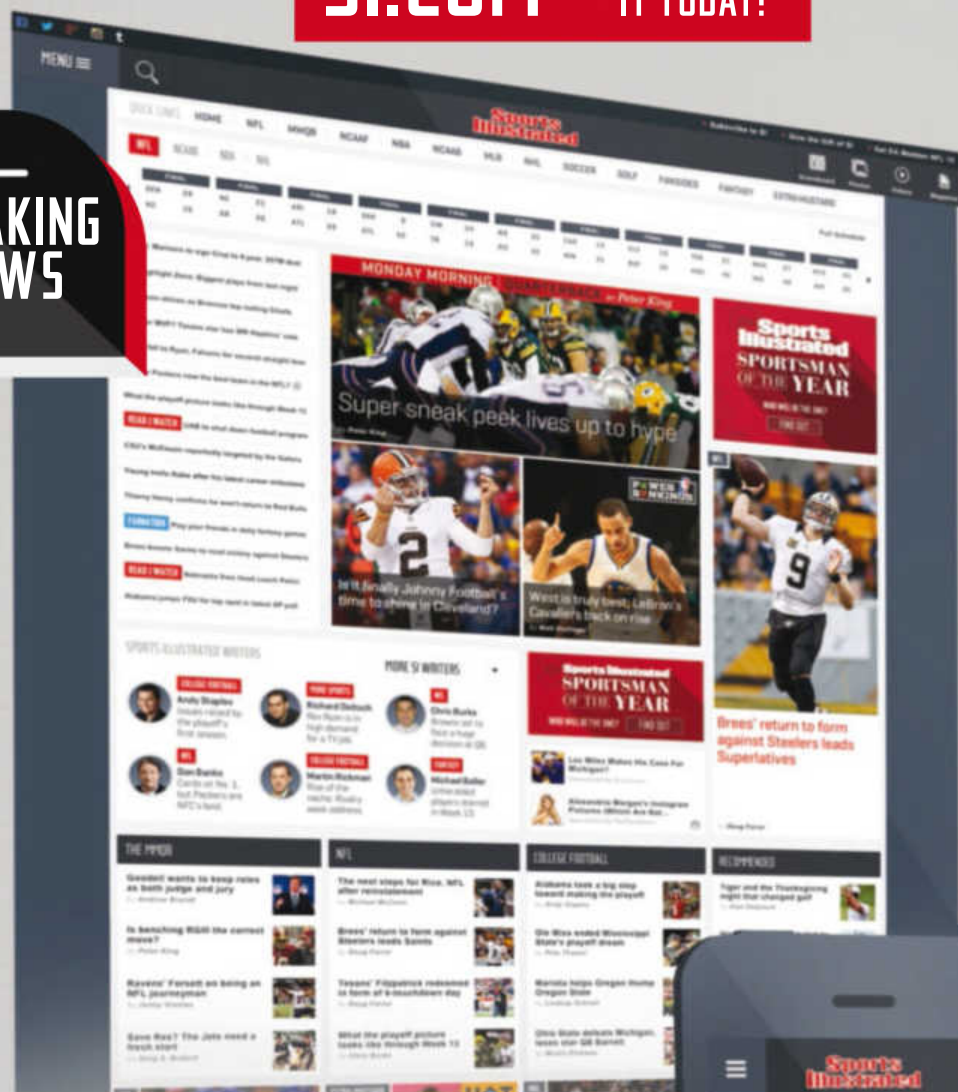
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wine, but 300 cases didn't measure up. Instead of offering an inferior wine, Peterson suggested selling the 300 cases wholesale, even though they would lose about \$200,000.

"If you want to make a high-end wine, you have to be ruthless with quality selection," Peterson says.

Huard and Marino didn't hesitate. They sold the rejected cases to another winery for about \$25 a gallon, and it was used in a 91-point blend. Good, but not good enough for *Passing Time*. "We had to establish our identity," Huard says. "We are sparing no expense to make Washington's next great Cabernet."

Their first vintage, a 2012 Cabernet Sauvignon, was released in April. It received a 93 in *Wine Spectator* and a 94 in *The Wine Advocate* (placing them in the Outstanding category for each), immediately putting *Passing Time* on the map within Washington's \$4.8 billion wine industry.

Of the 500 cases of that initial vintage—which they sold at \$75 a bottle—only a handful remain. Nobody takes a salary except the winemaker, and all proceeds go directly back into the company for the production of their next wine.

Passing Time will make 450 cases of its 2013 vintage, and its barrel scores are higher than the 2012. The 2014 vintage will be released in '17, which is when Huard & Co. plan to take



Smell of Success

Markings on the barrel indicate where a vintage came from, and once it's ready, Huard uses a wine thief to siphon some for a sip before it is bottled and sold.



the business to the next level. They'll produce 1,200 to 1,500 cases and expand to three Cabernet Sauvignons. There will be one from each of Washington's three most famous appellations—Walla Walla, Horse Heaven Hills and Red Mountain—showcasing the subtle differences among each region. They project that by their sixth year, they will start to make a profit.

"We want to really build something. Make it special," Marino says during a

visit to New York City in July. "This is definitely not a vanity project."

Marino talks about everything from the four quarterbacks who have since joined him in the 5,000-passing-yard-season pantheon ("I did it 31 years ago") to his first off-season after retirement ("It was tough . . . you have withdrawals") to the not-yet-real *Ace Ventura 3* ("If someone calls, sure I'd do it"). He reflects on how great it is to be in business with Huard, a friend whom he trusts to run the show when he can't be around.

"I'm good at drinking it," says Marino, who can remember his great-grandfather Constantine and cousin Chucky making wine in 55-gallon drums in their basement when he was growing up in Pittsburgh. "That's my job. Social director and drinker."

BACK IN Woodinville, Huard double-checks to make sure he has put the stoppers back into the barrels correctly. Construction workers are building a huge new room that *Passing Time* can use for tastings and parties. Huard asks a colleague if the fresh coat of paint could affect the wine, and he's assured it won't. Satisfied, he cleans his wine glass and wine thief, turns off all the lights and walks to his car.

"Oh, you know what, wait," he says, jogging back into the building to grab four more cases of wine. "I still have deliveries to make." □

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To watch a video about Damon Huard and to see the entire Pro-Files video series, go to SI.com/pro-files

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Hannah O'Sullivan | *Chandler, Ariz.* | *Golf*

Hannah, a senior at Hamilton High, won the U.S. Women's Amateur, beating Sierra Brooks of Sorrento, Fla., 3 and 2 in the 36-hole final at Portland [Ore.] Golf Club. Last February she won the Symetra Tour's Gateway Classic to become, at age 16, the youngest winner in the 35-year history of the developmental circuit. Hannah has committed to USC.



Kingsley Ifedi | *Charlotte* | *Football*

Kingsley, a 6' 3", 215-pound junior at Vance High, completed 23 of 33 passes for 440 yards and six touchdowns in a season-opening 54-12 win over West Mecklenburg High. His first play in his first-ever varsity start was an 81-yard TD pass to his brother, senior wideout Jonathan Ifedi, and his passing yards were a single-game school mark.



Emily Henrich | *Orchard Park, N.Y.* | *Rugby*

Emily, a sophomore center at Orchard Park High, scored five tries and kicked four conversions in a 33-29 win over New York City's Play Rugby Academy for the state title. The state tournament MVP, Emily was the youngest player named to the under-18 Girls High School All-American 15's national team, which beat British Columbia in two friendlies last month.

FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited by **ALEXANDRA FENWICK**



Hunter Hoffler | *Moreland, Ga.* | *Fly-fishing*

Hoffler, a freshman at Hampden-Sydney College, took gold at the youth world championships, catching 67 rainbow and brown trout in Vail, Colo., at Sylvan Lake, Dillon Reservoir and the Colorado, Blue and Eagle Rivers to lead the U.S. to its third straight team title. This year's youth national champ, Hunter is the host of a fly-fishing TV show called *In the Loop*.



Taylor Tashima | *Wilmette, Ill.* | *Volleyball*

Tashima, a sophomore setter at Northwestern, came back from surgery to remove a benign tumor from her right sinus and orbital cavity last February to help the junior national team win the European Global Challenge in Pula, Croatia, with a 3-2 win over Italy in July. Last season she led all Big Ten freshmen in double-doubles.



Ryan Blanton | *Lilburn, Ga.* | *Baseball*

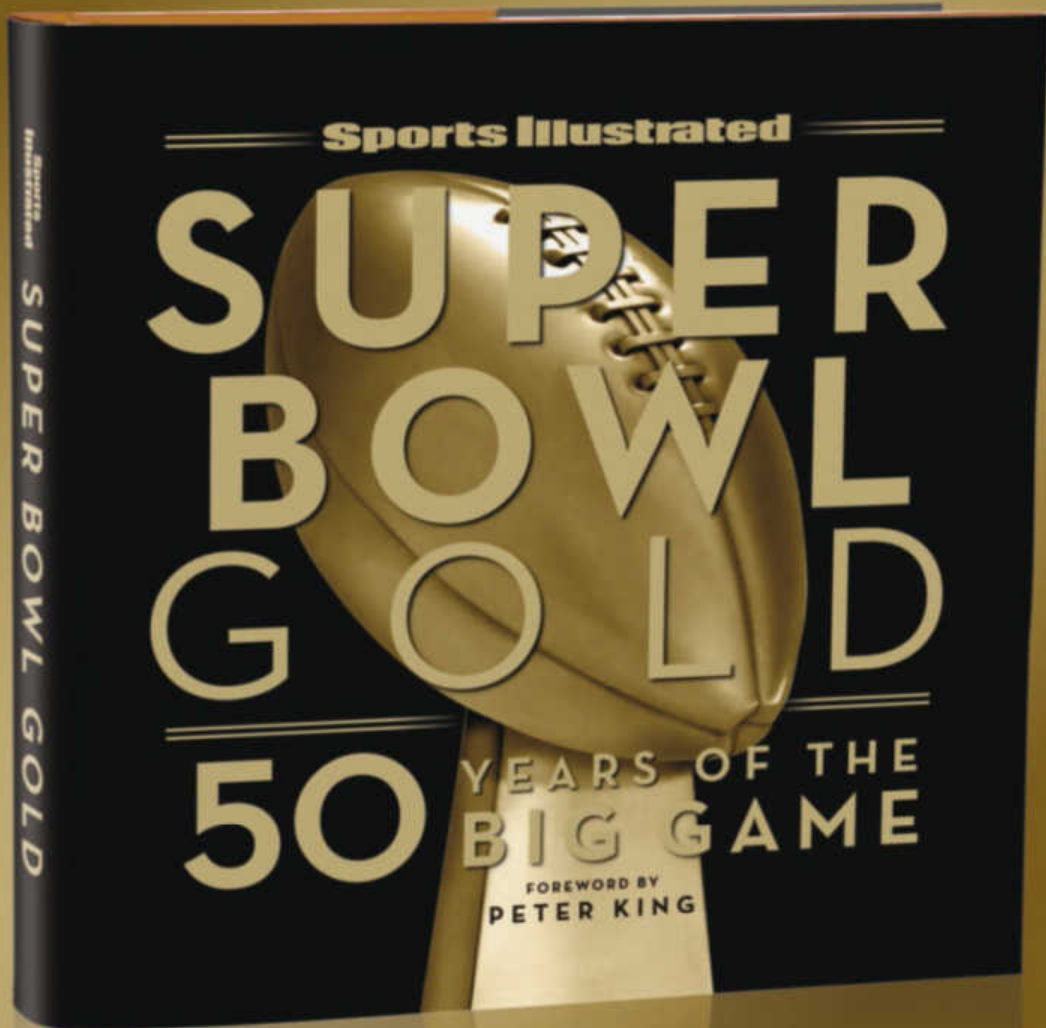
Blanton, a centerfielder at Georgia State, was named a New England Collegiate Baseball League All-Star for a repeat summer. He had a 1.000 fielding percentage, with 76 putouts and four assists, and batted .286 for the South Kingstown [R.I.] Ocean State Waves. Last season he was named All-Sun Belt Conference for the Panthers.

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JUST MY TYPE

→ Interview by **DAN PATRICK**

DAN PATRICK: Do you care about Deflategate?

BRIAN KELLY: No, not really. I know that the football having a little less poundage doesn't affect the game. I understand it's all about the cover-up, but it just seems to be about digging in the heels more than about the issue itself.

DP: Are deflated balls an issue in college football?

BK: Not at all. The game is not decided by that. There are not even kicking balls in college football. It really doesn't impact what we do.

DP: Have you ever considered fining players through a system like the one Virginia Tech reportedly had?

BK: It's not something that in my 26 years I would do. I have a ton of respect for [Hokies] Coach [Frank] Beamer.

I would never question anything he does. For me, it's so hard on these kids financially. My kids here do not have that kind of money. We try behavior modification.

DP: What behavior modification?

BK: Getting up early for study table on Sunday. If you have to get up at five o'clock on a Sunday morning, you will start to make sure you don't skip class.

DP: How is it being featured on Showtime's Hard Knocks—style show [A Season with Notre Dame Football]?

BK: Well, I have a boom mike



BRIAN KELLY

IRISH UP

Entering his sixth season in South Bend, Notre Dame's coach is 45–20 and hopes his new starting quarterback can bring the Fighting Irish their 12th consensus national title.

over my head right now. I went to the bathroom and had to unplug my wire.

DP: Have you ever seen the show *Hoarders*?

BK: I've heard of it. I don't get a ton of TV time.

DP: Well, Urban Meyer is a quarterback hoarder.

BK: That's one way to put it. Or, he's an outstanding recruiter and a great judge of talent. He's very fortunate he had the ability to move Braxton Miller [from QB] to wide receiver. That's a luxury.

DP: Tell me about your new quarterback.

BK: [Junior] Malik [Zaire] is a young man who plays with a great deal of passion and emotion and has great leadership abilities. He can impact our football team as a runner and as a thrower.

DP: Notre Dame will make the playoff if...

BK: We stay healthy.

DP: That's all you're going to give me?

BK: It still comes down to quarterback play, Malik's ability to continue to get better and if we can stay healthy on defense. Those are the things that derailed us last year. We couldn't take care of the football, and our play at [quarterback] did not get better by the end of the year.

DP: Can you bang the phone down angrily when we hang up so I can get on the TV show?

BK: I can't do that because then it's seen as all I do is get mad. I got mad on the sideline one time six years ago, and I'm still trying to live that down. □

GUEST SHOTS SAY WHAT?



Former NFL QB
Kurt Warner

doesn't think cutting down the preseason would reduce injuries. "If you go to just two games, that becomes more wear and tear on the starters," Warner said. "You're going to play those guys more than they would normally play." ... I asked



Raiders QB
Derek Carr

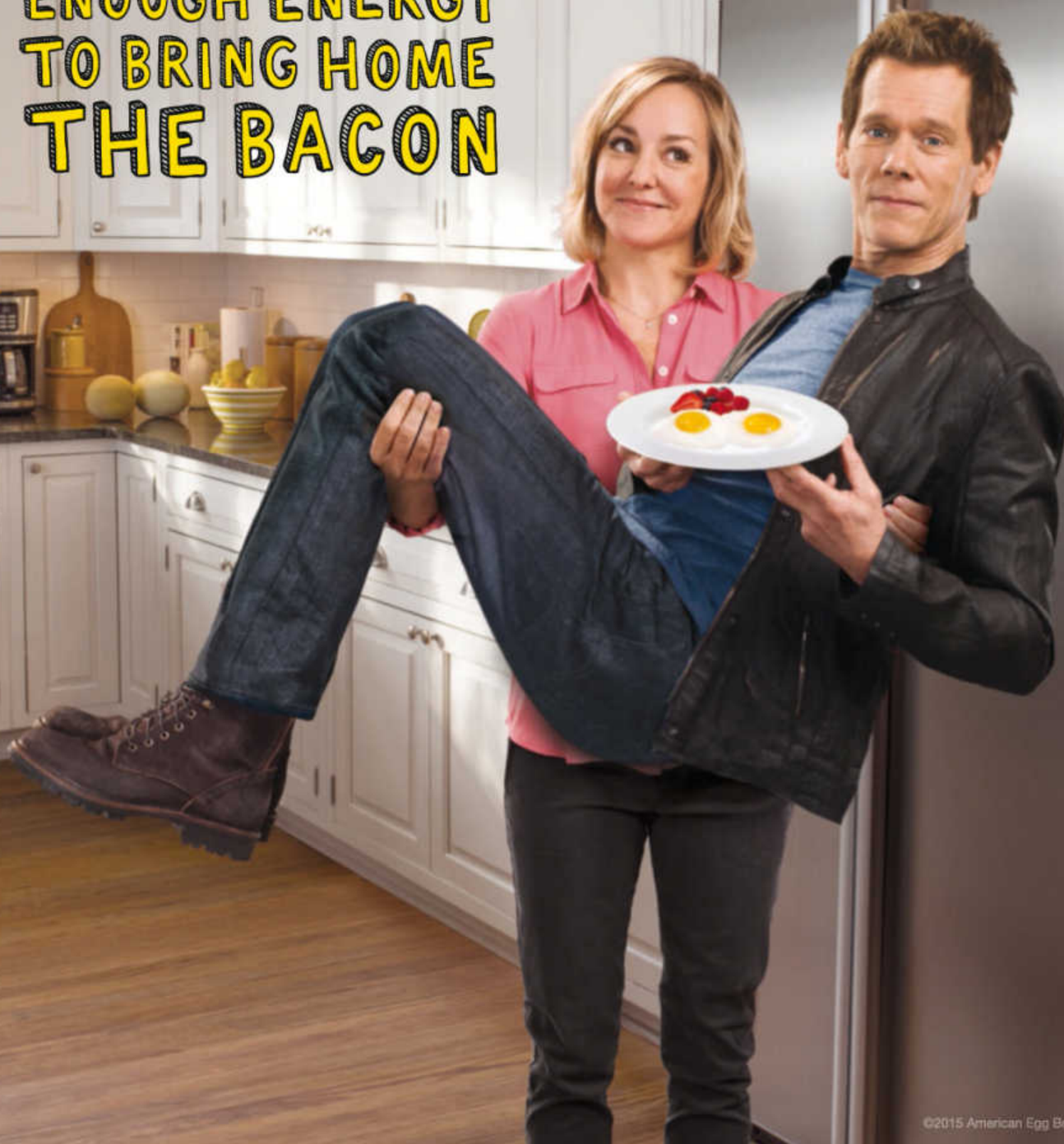
why he stopped griping about taking hits to his brother David, who holds the record for most sacks in a season [76]. "He said try playing the Chargers in Week 2 of your rookie year with Junior Seau and Marcellus Wiley coming after



you." ... Former NFL QB
Jim McMahon

said many of his postretirement health issues were the result of untreated fractures. Said McMahon, "At some point in my career I had a broken neck that nobody told me about."

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The Case for . . . Kyle Busch

BY ANDREW LAWRENCE

RIGHT NOW THERE

isn't a driver in NASCAR with a hotter hand or heavier foot than Kyle Busch. Through 24 Sprint Cup races, Busch has won four times—his last coming on July 26, at Indianapolis. That's a nearly unheard-of success rate in the current era, especially considering that Busch started just 13 of those races. Only Jimmie Johnson, who has contested every race, has as many victories as Busch in 2015.

Johnson is also the only other Cup driver in the Chase era to win three races in a row, which Busch did at Kentucky, New Hampshire and Indy. Add in his checkered flags from the Xfinity (three) and Truck series (two), and Busch looks even more formidable. What sets Busch's three-race run apart from Johnson's two such streaks (in 2004 and '07, the latter on JJ's way to the second of his six championships) is that it came during a stretch in which NASCAR was experimenting with two different aerodynamic rules packages. On July 11, on Kentucky's 1.5-mile tri-oval, the cars were outfitted to provide less downforce—rendering them more maneuverable. On Indianapolis's unique rectangle-shaped, 2.5-mile layout, the cars were given more drag—making them *less* maneuverable. (Meanwhile the second race in Busch's streak, on Loudon's 1.1-mile oval on July 19, was run with the standard high-downforce package.) Each time, Busch started inside



the first five rows of the grid and claimed the checkered flag. If there's a stick-and-ball achievement that Busch's approaches, it's Serena Williams winning Grand Slam titles on hard courts, clay and grass.

Busch's success could not have seemed less likely six months ago, when the season began at Daytona. Near the end of the Xfinity race there, Busch veered off track and rammed his Toyota Camry nose-first into a solid concrete interior wall. He sustained a compound fracture in his lower

right leg, a small fracture in his left foot and a sprained left finger. The injuries parked him for four months, a setback that looked like the first in a series of hard-luck trials for his team, Joe Gibbs Racing. A month after Busch landed in the hospital, JGR announced that J.D. Gibbs, the team president and 46-year-old son of owner and Hall of Fame football coach Joe Gibbs, was undergoing treatment for "symptoms impacting areas of brain function" that most likely stemmed from an earlier head injury that went undiagnosed. The two incidents clearly took a toll on the four-car Sprint Cup franchise. With Busch out, JGR struggled to just two wins in 11 races.

But when Busch returned to the track on May 16, everything turned around. Not only did he quickly find his way back to Victory Lane—after winning just once last year, at Fontana—but he also lifted his teammates along the way. Since Busch's return JGR's three other drivers—Matt Kenseth, Denny Hamlin and Carl Edwards—have zoomed into the top of the standings and booked spots in the Chase. Whether Busch will join them, however, remains to be seen. By NASCAR rules he must remain in the top 30 in points to qualify, even with those four wins.

Right now Busch, having missed so many starts, is 29th (46 points ahead of 31st place Cole Whitt) with two races left in the "regular season." If for some reason—accidents, a mechanical failure or two—Busch falls below the playoff cut, NASCAR should make a special exception for him. He's more than proved himself to be exceptional already. □

+
4

Cup wins in 2015 for Busch, tied for the most by any driver

11

Races missed this year by Busch after a February crash



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CHAT

BY AUSTIN MURPHY

Photograph by Coty Tarr
For Sports Illustrated

Photo Illustration by SI Premedia

ODELL BECKHAM JR.'S STAR-MAKING MOMENT—THAT INTERNET-IMPLODING GRAB ON SUNDAY NIGHT FOOTBALL—WAS JUST A SMALL SCENE IN A LARGER ENSEMBLE STORY. AS LAST YEAR'S ELECTRIC ROOKIE RECEIVERS RETURN FOR AN ENCORE, HERE'S A WORKING TITLE:

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CHANG FIRE





TRACKING HIS TARGET as it fell from the sky, Odell Beckham Jr. performed a hasty calculation: To make this catch he would need to leap and twist to his left, then snag the ball with his right hand while plunging backward into . . . the pole-vault pit at Tulane's Westfeldt practice facility.

This was around 2002 or '03. Beckham was eight or nine, and his mother, Heather Van Norman, a former All-America sprinter at LSU, was the Green Wave's track and field coach. To keep boredom at bay, the boy would circle the track throwing passes to himself. For especially acrobatic efforts, he would toss the ball over the pole-vault mat.

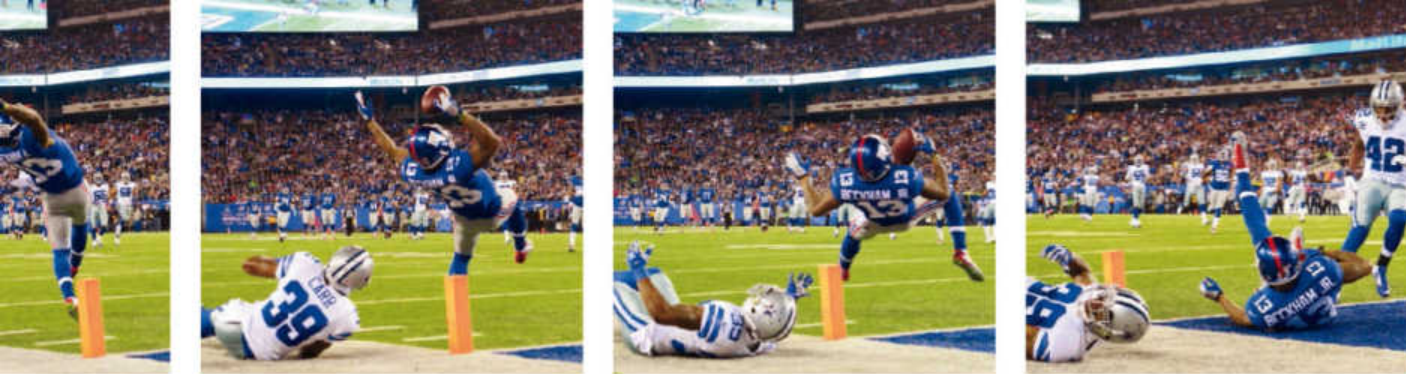
"I would jump exactly like *this*," Beckham recalled after a recent Giants practice, arching his back like a Fosbury-flopping high jumper, "and catch it on the mat. One-handed, two-handed—all kinds of different ways."

Those solitary heroics prefigured what was, probably, the most sensational grab in NFL history, executed last Nov. 23 in a losing cause against the Cowboys: The airborne rookie levitated like a magic carpet, his right arm suddenly elastic, it seemed, as he snagged the spheroid, which somehow lodged in the crescent formed by thumb and forefinger. Dude made the play with three digits, max, all the while being mugged by Cowboys cornerback Brandon Carr, who was flagged for interference, and who quickly wearied of discussing

CLASS ACTS

Beckham's catch (above) may have been Aladdin-like, but fellow rookies such as Evans (right) put up cartoony numbers in 2014 too: His 12 TDs tied OBJ.





CATCHING FIRE

the Catch, later griping to reporters, “I’m not going to keep talking about one play,” sensing, correctly, that he and this young Giant were now linked and would remain so, through the decades, as Ralph Branca is to Bobby Thomson. That grab served as a kind of capstone for a brilliant (if compressed) season: His 91 receptions for 1,305 yards and 12 touchdowns, for which Beckham was named NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year, came in just 12 games, a dodgy right hamstring having sidelined him throughout September.

In the end, though, OBJ’s redonkulous grab turned out to be but one highlight in a reel of big plays turned in by a class of rookie receivers that is likely to go down as the best in NFL history. Beckham is merely the most renowned member of this band of sticky-fingered trailblazers who upended expectations about how much, and how soon, first-year wideouts could produce.

Only one of them, however, made a play so seismic that it shook his world “like a snow globe,” as Beckham says. “It all just came on so fast”—the dinner invite from LeBron James; the text exchanges with Michael Jordan; the chance to hang out with both his fútbol namesake, David Beckham, and his fellow Big Apple fashion plate, Anna Wintour.

So sublime was the Catch that it launched a thousand memes. Our favorite: an in-flight OBJ superimposed onto the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, touched by a

white-bearded Old Testament God. But the play was neither divine intervention nor dumb luck. Beckham, 22, had been preparing for his close-up, that moment, for more than half his life.

In 2010 he became only the second receiver in the history of New Orleans’s Isidore Newman School to go over 1,000 yards receiving. (The other guy’s 1,000-yard season might be more impressive, considering that Cooper Manning was probably playing out of position.) In the process of refining his craft at LSU, Beckham would face off against fellow Tigers wideout Jarvis Landry, now a Dolphin, in one-handed catching contests. The worse the pass, OBJ explains, the better the catch. Now, as a Giant, his pregame routine includes a series of (intentionally) off-target balls flung by assistant equipment manager Ed Skiba.

It is a jaw-dropping warmup act, but one that lodges in the craw of a few football purists. “Two hands, please,” clucked New York coach/assistant principal Tom Coughlin after a training camp practice last month. Friend and mentor to Beckham though he is, former Cowboys great Michael Irvin discerned, in OBJ’s pregame show, an element of *Look at me!* And besides, Irvin recalled telling the rookie, “you’ll never make a catch like that in the game.”

“And then,” marvels the Hall of Famer, “he went out and made that play.” While there are many gleaming facets to Beckham’s game—his precise routes, his Neo-like hang time, his uncanny knack for gaining separation from even Pro Bowl corners such as Richard Sherman—they are usually overshadowed by a single topic, and we aren’t talking about the tips of his hair, a shade best described as nuclear caramel.

“I don’t catch the ball with one hand to show off,” Beckham insists. “It’s not about showboating. It’s more like I’m showing you that this is something I’ve practiced, something I’ve worked on. For me this is not out of the ordinary.”

There is a grander ambition in play. Beckham in person exudes a kind of old-soul serenity and humility, coexisting alongside profound confidence in his ability and an abiding thirst to leave his mark on the game. He seeks nothing less than “to expand the boundaries” of the wide receiver position, “to change the parameters, the level of expectations, for pass catchers.”

“IT ALL CAME ON SO FAST,” SAYS BECKHAM: THE DINNER INVITE FROM LEBRON, THE TEXTS WITH MJ....

CARLOS M. SAAVEDRA FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (3); STREET FLECA/GETTY IMAGES

THE THING IS, Beckham is not alone. Pushing him in this quest last season was a Hands Team for the ages. While OBJ spent Weeks 1 through 4 smoldering on the sideline, willing his hamstring to heal, the Panthers' 6' 5", 245-pound Kelvin Benjamin—who tore his left ACL on Aug. 19 and will miss this season—was earning the NFL's Offensive Rookie of the Month award, walling off and posting up on more diminutive defenders, just as he had the previous season at Florida State.

Hitting his stride a bit later in the year was another 6' 5" rookie with a helipad-sized catch radius: the Buccaneers' Mike Evans, who plays 10 to 15 pounds lighter than Benjamin and, as a result, is more crisp and nimble in and out of his cuts. He's also more potent as a deep threat. Evans's success—he finished with 1,051 receiving yards and a dozen touchdowns, tied with Beckham last season for the most by a first-year wideout—seems more remarkable considering how little football he has played. After one season at Ball High in Galveston, Texas, he played just two years at Texas A&M, then entered the 2014 draft. Around that time, Irvin recalls, “people were giving so much love to [A&M quarterback] Johnny Manziel, it was like Johnny was making Mike. Well, maybe Mike was the one making Johnny.”

And, lest we forget, the Saints' Brandin Cooks was leading the rookies in catches, with 53, when a broken right thumb ended his year in Week 11. No less encouraging, according to Pro Football Focus: The quicksilver Cooks led *all* NFL receivers in “wins per target.”

Each a first-rounder, Evans (at No. 7), Beckham (12), Cooks (20) and Benjamin (28) were drafted *after* the Bills nabbed Sammy Watkins (4), whose reward for being so highly regarded could also be construed as his punishment. Despite a raft of nagging injuries and the fact that for much of the season, he says, “I felt worn down, physically and mentally,” Watkins put up respectable numbers: 65 catches for 982 yards and six TDs. Those stats might've been fatter if his quarterbacks—EJ Manuel and, following Manuel's benching with a 58.0 completion percentage, Kyle Orton—had not sprayed the ball all over the field. Watkins admits, “I got caught last year kinda feeling sorry for myself,” on account of the Bills' QB situation. This season he intends to “trust the coaches and control what I can control.”

Time will tell if the 2014 crop of wideouts emerges as the best in NFL history. (Its only real competition for that distinction: the class of 1996, featuring Marvin



THE GIFT OF GRAB

Watkins (above) battled bad QB play; Benjamin must come back from a torn ACL. But both will thrive.



Harrison, Terrell Owens, Keyshawn Johnson and Amani Toomer.) But it sure looks like the deepest. Despite leaving Vanderbilt as the SEC's all-time leader in receiving yards and catches, Jordan Matthews lasted until the second round, when the Eagles traded up for him. Having earned the trust of coach Chip Kelly with his football intellect and a work ethic rivaling that of his cousin, Jerry Rice, Matthews finished with 67 catches for 872 yards and eight TDs; now he's primed to be Philly's No. 1 wideout in 2015. Matthews's sometimes-workout partner and fellow second-rounder, Landry, pulled in 84 receptions for Miami, second only to his old LSU teammate. John (Smokey) Brown, who might as well have been nicknamed for all the singed cornerbacks in his wake, lasted until the third round before Arizona pounced; scouts were put off by his size (5' 11", 179) and transcript. While Pittsburg State was Brown's third college, the number that caught Arizona's eye was 4.34—his combine time in the 40. After snapping him up with the 91st pick, Cards coach Bruce Arians deployed Brown as he'd used Antonio Brown in Pittsburgh and T.Y. Hilton in Indianapolis. John Brown proved a quick study, and clutch: His four game-winning TDs set an NFL rookie record.

Not far behind that early-blooming crew were Martavis Bryant (Steelers) and Davante Adams (Packers), whose paths have since diverged. On Aug. 27, Bryant was slapped with a four-game suspension for violating the league's substance-abuse policy—four days after Adams was thrust into Green Bay's starting lineup by the season-ending ACL tear suffered by Jordy Nelson. Bring it on, says Adams, last seen feasting on the Cowboys' secondary (seven catches, 117 yards, one TD) in the divisional playoff round. Indeed, his stock was spiking before Nelson went down, with coach Mike McCarthy referring to him as the “MVP of the off-season” and Aaron Rodgers raving about his “humongous upside.”

What's going on here? How to explain this widespread precocity at wide receiver? Consider this admission, buried in a 2012 Competition Committee report: “If someone wants to accuse the National Football League of promoting offense to make the game more exciting, [the committee] believes the league should plead guilty.”

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IT IS AUG. 5 in Spartanburg, S.C., on the exquisitely manicured campus of Wofford College, site of the Panthers' training camp. A layer of clouds, mercifully, holds the temperature below 90°. Halfway through the morning practice Cam Newton uncorks a 50-yard pass in the direction of Benjamin, marked by cornerback Josh Norman as they streak up the left sideline.

Using his right arm à la Dennis Rodman, Benjamin clears out the 6-foot corner, elevates over him to make the catch, then falls on top of him. In the process he knocks the wind out of Norman, who stays down for a minute. Flags fly, but—Insult, have you met Injury?—it's Norman whom the camp zebras call for interference. Small wonder he ended up in a shoving match with Newton a few days later.

"If they're both pushing, more often than not the tie's gonna go to the offensive guy," concedes Carolina defensive coordinator Sean McDermott. A defensive back, he says, has "got to know not to look for that call. That's just something we've got to contend with."

In its dual desires to decrease concussions and increase offensive pyrotechnics, the NFL has created a class of winners: QBs and receivers. Last season's edict for game officials to crack down on pass interference and defensive holding came three years after the league's decision to outlaw "forcibly hitting the neck or head area" of any player. That ruling also forbade the initiation of "unnecessary contact against a player who is in a defenseless posture."

"That in itself gave us a little bit of an advantage," says Giants slot receiver Victor Cruz. "Now, instead of it being just, 'See ball, hit ball,' these guys have to think for a split second. We can use that to make a guy miss."

"I'm still trying to wrap my head around exactly what a *defenseless* receiver is," says Hall of Fame wide receiver James Lofton, who may or may not envy the slightly less hazardous passage across the middle afforded to today's wideouts. "If a guy goes up high for the ball, you almost have to allow him to make the catch—or it's a flag."

"It's the antithesis of the environment in which we had to operate," agrees Irvin, whose 12-year NFL career ended in 1999 with a helmet-to-helmet shot from Eagles safety Tim Hauck. While that hit would be flagged today, it was, in its time, business as usual. Back then, Irvin points out, on almost every reception some headhunting defender sought to separate the receiver from the ball "as it got there, or before it got there."

"Now? I know that when the ball's in the air"—here he affects a prim, slightly effete tone—"you cannot hit me until after I catch it, and you can only hit me in a certain area."

Passing yards may be up, Irvin allows, but at what cost? Playing receiver today "doesn't require as much courage as before."

Which is not to say it requires less talent. Irvin has no problem admitting that players coming into the league today "are much better than us, physically. When I played, we had a big guy at one receiver, and that was me. And we had a fast guy at the other. Now, the big guy is the fast guy."

And the skilled guy.



YOU'RE A SAINT!

Cooks
(above) and
Adams can
be pass-
catching
saviors:
New Orleans
lost Jimmy
Graham;
Green Bay
is without
Nelson.

DAVID GRUNFELD/NOLA.COM/THE TIMES-PICAYUNE/LANDOV (COOKS); DAVID E. KUTHO FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED



For an exclusive video feature on Davante Adams, or to watch any of the Rising Stars series presented by Symetra, go to SI.com/risingstars

IN MAY 1995, Texas Senate Bill 1, part of an education reform act, gave students the green light to play on non-school teams all year long. An unintended consequence of that legislation: the hundreds of football seven-on-seven tournaments that have since sprung up around the state. By conservative estimates, some 900 Texas high schools—plus an unknown number of middle and elementary schools—now participate in them. In this way, the land of the bluebonnets has served as a bellwether: Where they did not already exist, such competitions have sprung up from coast to coast, providing catnip for recruiters and extra off-season reps for quarterbacks and receivers.

“This is a game of repetition,” says Lofton. “Lynn Swann and Paul Warfield probably had skill sets similar to, say, [Steelers All-Pro wideout] Antonio Brown and Odell Beckham Jr. And yes, back then they had spring practice in college. But they didn’t have guys running routes the entire off-season.” And as players have become more skilled, passing attacks have grown exponentially more sophisticated. Lofton played 16 NFL seasons, finishing in 1993 with the Eagles, whose route tree, at that time, featured nine pass patterns. By 2007, his final year as receivers coach of the Chargers, he says, “we had 54 routes.”

Texas’s seven-on-seven state championship has morphed, since its 1998 inception, into a three-day, 128-team colossus. It takes place, incidentally, in College Station, home of Texas A&M, whose 2014 Pro Day gave us one of the more surreal vignettes in the history of Aggie football. Before a convocation of 75 NFL officials and one former U.S. president—George H.W. Bush and his two dogs arrived by golf cart—Manziel completed 61 of 64 passes, all the while bopping to a soundtrack of songs by his close personal friend Drake.

Yet the Buccaneers coaches in attendance only had eyes for Johnny Football’s rangy go-to receiver. Coming from the Bears, where his starting wideouts had been Brandon Marshall (6’ 4”) and Alshon Jeffery (6’ 3”), first-year Bucs coach Lovie Smith envisioned the 6’ 5” Evans as a big-bodied bookend to incumbent WR1 Vincent Jackson, also 6’ 5”. The Bucs snapped him up with the seventh pick.

Evans has since stayed in texting touch with many of his fellow class of 2014 wideouts, whom he describes as “a great group of guys,” both talented and lucky: “I think we all got put in really good positions.”

That’s a rose-colored view of his own situation. Last September, Tampa’s offensive coordinator, Jeff Tedford, took a health-related leave of absence. The Bucs then went the entire year with a pair of struggling passers—Josh McCown and Mike Glennon—floundering behind a shoddy line while running plays called by a QB coach, Marcus Arroyo, who was in over his head.

Evans thrived despite those headwinds, and despite his thin football résumé. As it turns out, he’s a quick study. “He sees the game in slow motion,” says his position coach, Andrew Hayes-Stoker. “He’s got an exceptional feel for where he needs to be and how he can get there.”

To get where he hopes to be, Evans spent a week last March working with Randy Moss, who originally reached out to him—followed him on Twitter, actually—after noticing that the rookie

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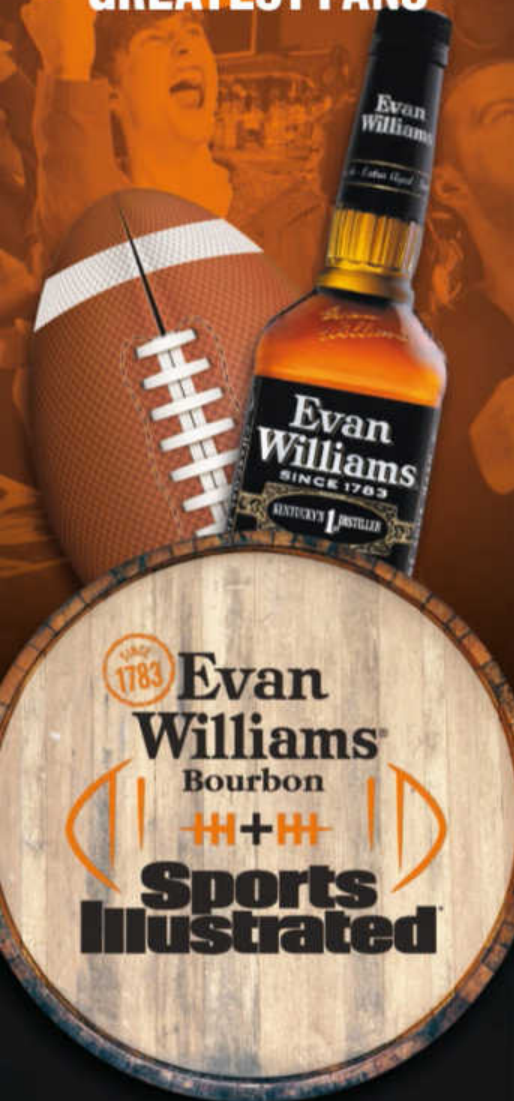
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emulated his TD celebration. (We're talking about the one where Moss pantomimes pulling open elevator doors, not the one where he faux moons the crowd.) "What I liked was the swag he played with," says Evans, who idolized Moss as a boy. "He even had a verb named after him: You got Mossed. That's tight."

Between Tampa's hiring this off-season of well-regarded OC Dirk Koetter and the selection of Florida State QB Jameis Winston with the No. 1 pick in last spring's draft, Evans hopes to be Mossing opposing corners early and often. "I love Mike Evans," declares Irvin. "I think he and Winston could build a relationship over there that will . . . *Blow. People. Away.*"

Or maybe it will be Cooks who eclipses his fellow class members in 2015. His thumb is healed; he has looked terrific in camp. Having spent time in San Diego during the off-season working with Drew Brees, honing their communication and timing, he's happy to report that the Saints' system is now second nature to him. "When you think, you slow down," he says. "Last season I was thinking." Around the time those two were fine-tuning their chemistry, Smokey Brown was a houseguest of Carson Palmer's in Southern California. Aside from their workouts, the Cardinals' QB conducted daily tutorials focusing on hot reads, helping his pupil see why and when he calls audibles. The result: "I'm adjusting more quickly and playing faster," says Brown.

A common denominator among the class of 2014: These guys are ravenous for even small morsels pertaining to their craft. There was Beckham, not long ago, drawing Irvin out on how better to win a release from the line of scrimmage against an aggressive, quick-jamming cornerback. What followed was a lecture on the speed of sound, the Playmaker explaining to OBJ that when a quarterback is calling the cadence, "the sound goes from his mouth to the ears of the center, and then it reverberates out to the wide receiver." Beckham could win that minibattle, his elder counseled, by exploding from his stance a few milliseconds early. "Don't wait," Irvin urged. "Cut out the time it takes the sound to travel!"

While number 88's theories on acoustics may not hold water, Beckham will hold on to all balls thrown in his vicinity. If the NFL really is looking to promote offense and entertainment, the future of the game is in very good hands. □

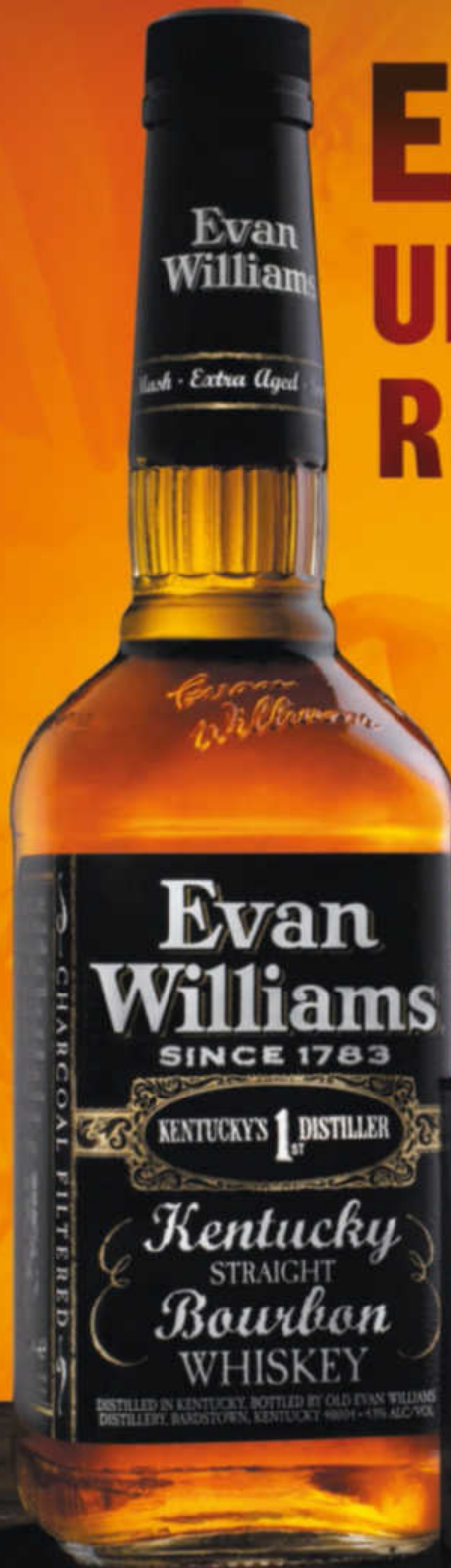
**GO!
CUBS!
GO!**

For maturing QBs—say, Miami's Ryan Tannehill or Philly's Sam Bradford—young'uns like Landry (above) and Matthews make life easier.



MARK REIS/COLORADO SPRINGS GAZETTE/INSP/ANDOV (LANDRY); AL TELEMANS FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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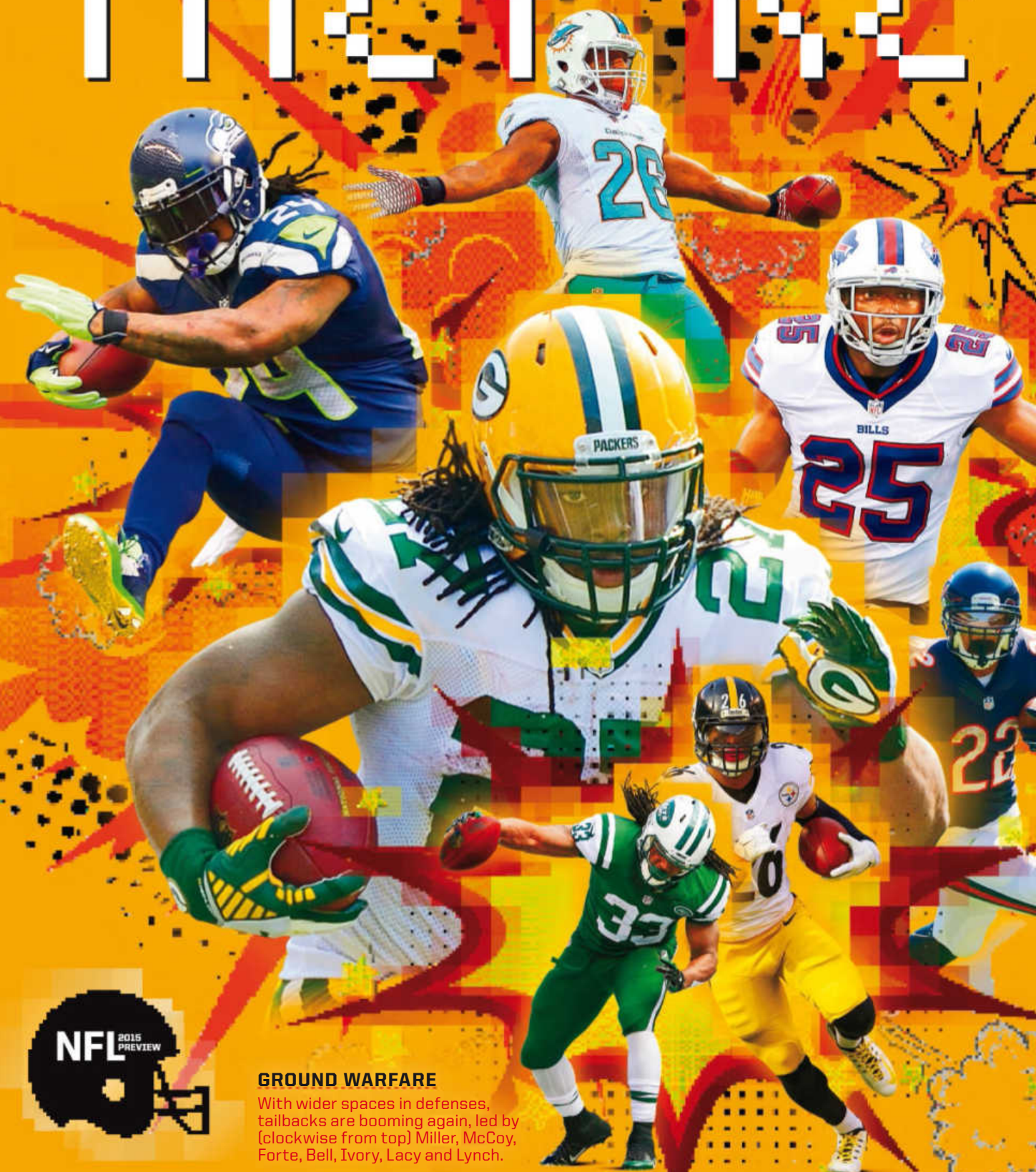
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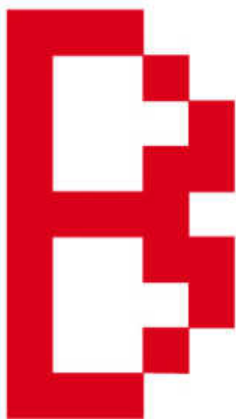
With wider spaces in defenses, tailbacks are booming again, led by (clockwise from top) Miller, McCoy, Forte, Bell, Ivory, Lacy and Lynch.

BACK...

FOR YEARS RUNNING BACKS SEEMED HEADED FOR IRRELEVANCY—DRAFTED LOW, PAID LESS AND INTERCHANGEABLE WITH EACH OTHER. **FORGET ALL THAT.** IN TODAY'S NFL, THOSE WHO RUN (AND RECEIVE) RULE

BY
ANDY
BENOIT

Photo
Illustration by
Stephen
Skalocky



BENEATH THE HILLSIDE of Murphy Canyon, under a dogged morning sun, the Chargers' offense lined up for a dry run of its foundational rushing plays. It was late July, the first day of training camp. In the backfield was rookie running back Melvin Gordon. Split out wide, Keenan Allen and Malcom Floyd. In the slot, free-agent pickup Stevie Johnson, a three-time 1,000-yard receiver. The formation had all the signs of a pass play. But upon taking the snap, quarterback Philip Rivers turned around and . . . *handed off to Gordon.*

The first-round draft pick started right, slashed left and cut up to the linebackers' level at nearly full speed. From there, with one juke, he shot into the open field. It was easy yardage, obtained not just with explo-

sive movement but also because the offense had spread out with three receivers.

Murmurs and wry smiles passed around the field. Onlookers had just seen the cutting edge of pro football strategy.

ABOUT 15 YEARS AGO NFL fullbacks started to disappear, having become irrelevant as offenses used more three-receiver, single-back sets. Today the position is not quite extinct, but like the giant panda or the mountain gorilla, it is on the endangered-species list for the foreseeable future. When no running back was selected in the first round of the 2013 or '14 draft, it was widely suggested that this position too—a marquee one since the league's inception—was drifting toward the fullback's fate. By last season, running back was only the 10th-highest-paid position (based on the average of the top salaried player from each position per team). It was common to hear about runners' interchangeability.

But this past off-season brought a minor resurgence for tailbacks. Four were drafted among the first 54 picks, including Todd Gurley (No. 10, by the Rams) and

Gordon (No. 15). Meanwhile, veteran backs DeMarco Murray and LeSean McCoy signed with new clubs for fat average annual salaries of \$8 million apiece.

One season provides too small a data sample to establish a running backs tide, but stop and examine the broader NFL landscape. Notice how many upper-tier quarterbacks are on the back nine of their careers, approaching (or already on) the wrong side of 35? That lot includes Peyton Manning, Tom Brady, Drew Brees, Tony Romo, Eli Manning, Philip Rivers and Ben Roethlisberger. Other stars such as Aaron Rodgers, Joe Flacco



and Matt Ryan (we've now accounted for every active All-Pro QB) have quietly entered their 30s. They're by no means nearing the end, but they're also no longer part of a youth movement.

So who is? Andrew Luck, soon to be 26, is a verified superstar. Russell Wilson is as accomplished as any other 26-year-old, though his game is very unorthodox and he's benefited from playing with the NFL's best defense and its toughest running back. Matthew Stafford and Ryan Tannehill, both 27, have improved steadily the past two years, but how much more can they grow? Derek Carr (24) and Teddy Bridgewater (22) are encouraging, but the jury's still out on them. History says that between Jameis Winston and Marcus Mariota (both 21), only one will succeed. Colin Kaepernick (27) and Robert Griffin III (25) have not developed as passers; Cam Newton (26) is talented but wildly inconsistent; Andy Dalton (27) and Nick Foles (26) are average; Johnny Manziel (22) is a train wreck. And 23-year-old Blake Bortles? Intriguing, but still with question marks.

One could argue that the running back is not endangered; the drop-back quarterback is. "It's not that the league is losing drop-back passers so much," says NFL Films senior producer Greg Cosell. "It's that with



SPACE ACES

Newcomers like Gordon (above) can learn a thing or two from the likes of Forte (left): Get in the open and go.

the nature of the college game, where so much of the spread passing concepts are played on the perimeter, quarterbacks enter the NFL with a steeper learning curve for drop-back passing. They're not being asked to do in college what they'll be asked to do in the NFL, which is throw the ball primarily in the middle of the field."

Drop-back quarterbacking has always been king in pro football because sturdy pocket passing is the easiest thing on which to build an aerial attack. Coaches love designing plays around stable geometry; as Bills offensive coordinator Greg Roman likes to say, "Geometry doesn't have bad days." A straight drop-back passer provides the steadiest fulcrum in the design of pass plays, making field spacing easier to control.

But in recent years the league has seen less-refined passers—guys who excel at running—and this has changed some of the passing game's geometry. Receivers' routes that once attacked north and south are now more inclined to go east and west. This leaves coaches drawing up plays with the understanding that their QB might leave the pocket, altering his throwing angles. Many passing concepts are being simplified, with more one-read defined throws and fewer multiread drop-back throws.

Altogether, this doesn't mean the NFL passing game is abating—the modern rules are too skewed in its favor, and the league overflows with electrifying young receivers. Rather, more and more balls are being caught within 10 yards of the line of scrimmage. To accommodate this, teams are using more three-receiver sets.

Which is where the running back fits in. When a third receiver is on the field, the defense must replace a linebacker with a defensive back (i.e., play nickel). When that third receiver spreads out and a DB—often a backup corner—



Check out TheMMQB.com's NFL podcast each week with Andy Benoit and Robert Klemko at SI.com/podcasts

WHY DON'T OFFENSES SPREAD OUT ON EVERY SNAP? "BECAUSE COACHES ARE STUPID," SAYS ONE COORDINATOR.

follows him, a run defender has now been removed from the box near the line of scrimmage. And *removing* a run defender is even better than blocking him.

Aligning in pass-suggestive formations is partly a response to modern-day defenses too. "The old 49ers' go-to running play used to be the split backs—they always found a way to get to the edge," says Chargers coach Mike McCoy. "Well, the game's changed. The speed of the defense is [improved]. It's just not as easy to do that."

There's a legitimate question to be asked here: Why don't offenses just spread out with three receivers on every snap? "Because coaches are stupid," laments one NFL offensive coordinator.

That might be a bit harsh, but there's a case to be made for using more three-receiver running packages. Besides creating more room for the ground game, the widening effect of three-wide spreads can limit coverage disguises: A pass defender who's feigning one look must now traverse more ground to reposition himself after the snap. This increased simplicity helps all those twentysomething QBs with the steep drop-back learning curve to which Cosell referred.

THERE'S LONG BEEN an assumption that spreading out means you can't establish a power-based rushing attack. Not true. McCoy's Chargers, who have one of the league's best-built three-receiver offenses, provide a great illustration. This off-season they drafted Gordon, re-signed 330-pound left tackle King Dunlap and acquired both 320-pound Broncos guard Orlando Franklin and 326-pound Rams right tackle Joe Barksdale in free agency. In 2014 they drafted 310-pound center Chris Watt in the third round, and in '13 they used a first-rounder on 339-pound D.J. Fluker, who this year will play right guard. This season the

IT'S LIKE YOUR TONGUE CRASHED INTO A CHOCOLATY, PEANUTY, CARAMEL ICEBERG.



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SPREAD THE NEWS

WIDENING THE FIELD WITH THREE RECEIVERS PROVED ADVANTAGEOUS IN 2014 FOR EVEN THE LEAGUE'S BIGGEST BACKS

	3-WR SETS	2-WR SETS
LESEAN MCCOY <i>Eagles</i> 208 lbs.	947 yards 4.6 ypc	317 yards 3.6 ypc
ARIAN FOSTER <i>Texans</i> 227 lbs.	800 yards 6.3 ypc	284 yards 3.8 ypc
LAMAR MILLER <i>Dolphins</i> 224 lbs.	798 yards 6.6 ypc	201 yards 3.1 ypc
EDDIE LACY <i>Packers</i> 230 lbs.	751 yards 5.2 ypc	251 yards 4.2 ypc
MATT FORTÉ <i>Bears</i> 218 lbs.	634 yards 4.1 ypc	216 yards 3.7 ypc
MARSHAWN LYNCH <i>Seahawks</i> 215 lbs.	609 yards 5.2 ypc	422 yards 4.2 ypc
LE'VEON BELL <i>Steelers</i> 244 lbs.	585 yards 4.4 ypc	249 yards 3.8 ypc
DEMARCO MURRAY <i>Cowboys</i> 217 lbs.	505 yards 4.5 ypc	914 yards 5.2 ypc
C.J. ANDERSON <i>Broncos</i> 224 lbs.	473 yards 5.3 ypc	226 yards 4.0 ypc
CHRIS IVORY <i>Jets</i> 222 lbs.	465 yards 5.2 ypc	161 yards 2.8 ypc

Chargers will run a predominantly three-receiver offense featuring a first-round running back and a mauling front five, the largest in the league according to one projection of '15 starting lineups.

"If you've got a big front and the [defenders] are smaller, it doesn't matter if you're in a two-back set or a single-back set," says Mike McCoy. "The offensive line is going to pound you regardless."

This discredits the notion that spread-system running backs must have elite speed and quickness to capitalize on the space around them. It seems almost silly that we ever assumed this; simple logic says that even the most plodding back is better when running against thin air—of which a spread creates more—than he is running against even defenders he could easily barrel over.

A perfect snapshot of this type of offense is Chip Kelly's Eagles. Kelly employs a simple, quick-firing spread scheme, but at his core he's a run-first coach who wants to pound the rock. Over the last two years Kelly has gotten rid of elite (and expensive) receivers DeSean Jackson and Jeremy Maclin, and this past off-season he traded away the league's most agile runner, McCoy. This created room to sign the bruising former Cowboy Murray along with ex-Chargers back Ryan Mathews. Among NFL teams, only the Vikings, Bears and Bills dedicate more of their payroll (based on percentage of 2015 cap

money) to running backs than Kelly's high-octane offense, which, by the way, ranks 21st in receiver payroll. (In '16 they'll be No. 1 for backs.)

Bottom line: Murray and Mathews fit Kelly's system better than the more nimble McCoy. As Kelly said back in 2008, when he was with Oregon, "We want [the back] to jam the ball into the hole and be a tough runner. We do not want a jingle-footed back trying to hit a home run. We want him to hit the ball into the line and get the tough yards. We are a blue-collar guy going to work."

What Kelly understands—and other coaches are just coming to realize—is that by spreading out the box, rushing lanes become more defined. When a tailback runs behind fewer blockers (and against fewer defenders), there's less for him to sort out and fewer chances for something to go wrong.

Last season the 10 leading rushers out of three-receiver sets were mostly backs who can win with power (*sidebar*). Collectively, those backs averaged more yards out of three-wide sets (5.1) than they did out of more traditional two-receiver looks (4.0). Granted, some of this was situational: A meaningless 10-yard draw on third-and-16 tends to come out of a three-wide, and some two-receiver runs come in short-yardage situations. But these are only snippets of the data. Overall, the evidence backs up the common sense that running from spread sets against fewer box defenders presents significant advantages.

As a counterpoint, proponents of old-school running games featuring tight ends and fullbacks (and occasionally a sixth lineman) might argue that the extra blockers give a ground game more diversity. The more blockers you have, the more running gaps you create. But isn't a gap merely a conduit for getting a ballcarrier into space? Why rely on a conduit if a spread formation creates space inherently?

Other antiquated offensive thinkers might point out that many slower-developing play-action passes (which are how offenses influence safeties in order to take deep shots) rely on having two backs: one to carry out the fake handoff built into a play-action, the other to provide the extra blocking that the QB's deeper drop requires. This is true, and it's a good reason to keep base running packages in your playbook. But there's a flip side. Big passing plays don't have to be restricted to balls that sail 45 yards through the air. More and more of them involve runs after the catch. And these are best set up in spreads, through mismatches created by the offense's formation.

WHICH BRINGS US back to the tailback. The most valuable backs today are the ones who can contribute as runners *and* receivers—and not just receiving dump-offs and screens but splitting into the slot or even out wide. Typically we've considered these hybrid players to be guys with dynamic speed and quickness—Reggie Bush, C.J. Spiller, Darren Sproles—but



WHAT A STIFF

Putting the 244-pound Bell out in the open against smaller bodies—here he had 30 pounds on Saints safety Kenny Vaccaro—is a no-brainer.

the most valuable multifaceted backs in today's NFL aren't necessarily the quickest; rather, they're the most fundamentally sound and, often, the most patient.

The poster child is Le'Veon Bell. The Steelers' second-round pick in 2013 is more nimble than he appears, but that's not the crux of his game. Bell thrives on versatility, vision and a nose for angles. Pittsburgh offensive coordinator Todd Haley thinks Bell could be a starting NFL receiver.

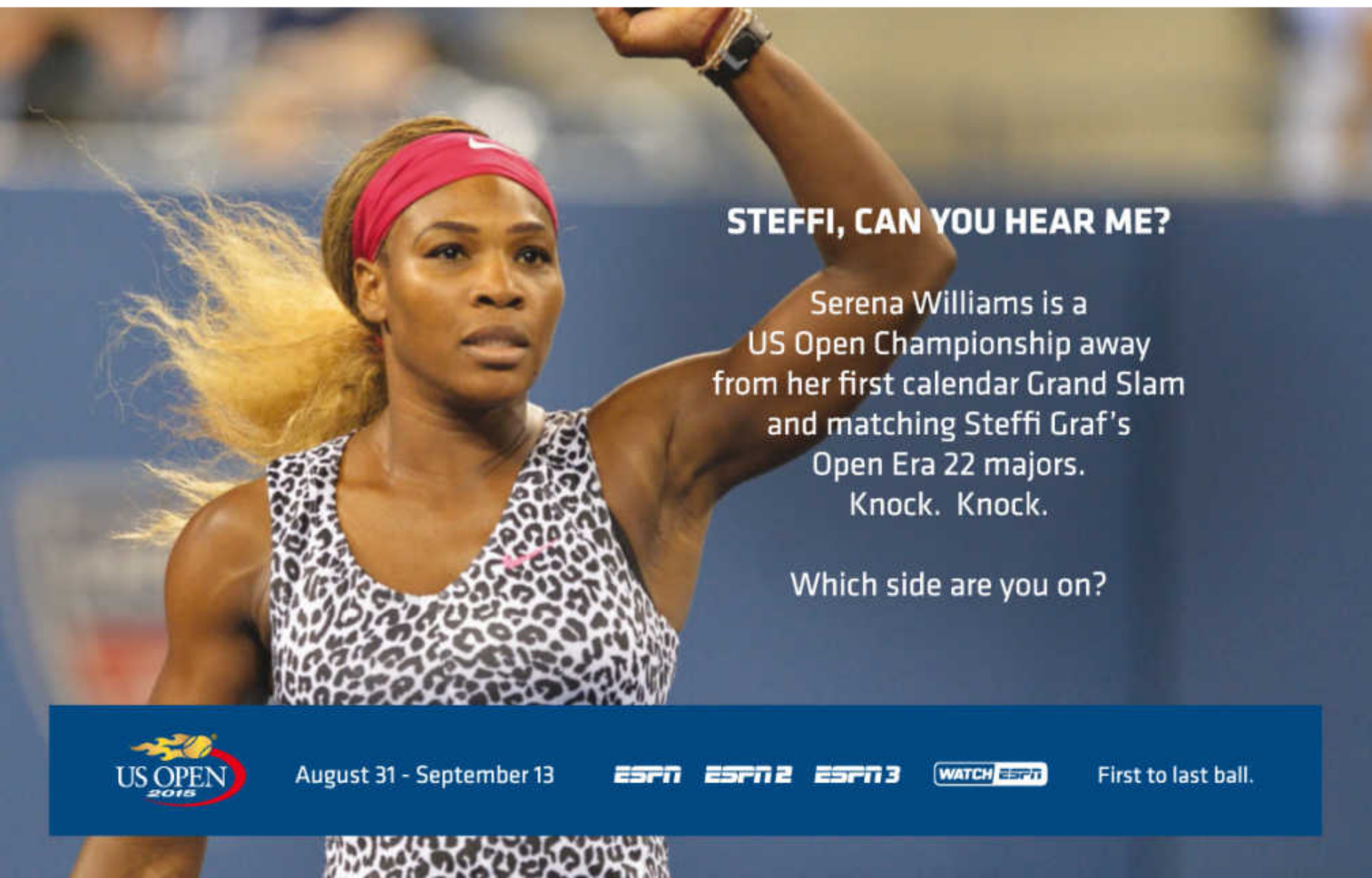
In the NFC the best example is the Bears' Matt Forte, who caught 102 balls last season to go with his 1,038 yards rushing. When Forte aligns at receiver, the defense, if matching the offense's personnel, will often

put a linebacker on him. That's a mismatch favoring Chicago. If the defense guards Forte with, say, a safety or a No. 4 corner, Forte can return to the backfield and take a handoff against a lighter (and now physically weaker) box.

This sort of chess match really favors an offense that plays up-tempo, getting to the line quickly after plays—something that new Bears coordinator Adam Gase did in Denver and could bring to the Windy City. More and more offenses are playing up-tempo these days, leaving defenses less time to diversify their fronts.

Even at 29—elderly for a running back—Forte is an excellent new-age back. He's steady and smooth, laterally quicker than expected and just explosive enough. With him Chicago can align in spread three-receiver sets, obtain a clear picture of the (now spread out) defense and either hand the ball off or throw quickly to a receiver, depending on the look. It's not a bad way to rein in quarterback Jay Cutler; everything is clearer, roomier and easier thanks to that lighter defensive box.

The times, like offensive geometry, are changing. The college game always trickles down to the pros. And, as Bill Parcells likes to say, you can only take the players that colleges feed you. That trickle-down won't save the fullback—but it will revitalize the position that, for the longest time, the fullback served to chaperone. □



STEFFI, CAN YOU HEAR ME?

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Which side are you on?



LET IT



LET

HOW ONE TROPICAL TRIP HELPED THE SUPER BOWL LOSERS SETTLE THEIR BEEFS AND SAY ALOHA TO SOME OFF-SEASON 'HAWKWARDNESS



BY
GREG
BISHOP

Illustration by
John Cuneo

THE OVERSIZED black bus carrying 30 members of the Seahawks drove away from Maui's Wailea Beach and banked right, up a hill, onto a dirt road. It climbed through a thicket of palm trees, bouncing over uneven terrain, until linebacker Bobby Wagner wondered if they had made a wrong turn into the jungle.

They had not. The bus turned one final corner and parked near the edge of a cliff, with the beach and the ocean and two breaching whales in the distance. One by one, the players disembarked and moved toward the cliff's edge, where they formed a circle. It was time for what the Seahawks call a "come to Jesus" meeting, a players'-only conference where brutal honesty was expected and everything—including the decisions that led to a crushing defeat in the final seconds of Super Bowl XLIX—was up for discussion. Their quarterback, Russell

Wilson, stood before them. He had organized this trip, invited the defense and secured a private plane for 85 passengers. And he had saved one final surprise until the end. "I brought you guys out here, away from everybody," Wilson said. "I want to have a heart-to-heart."

After the way the Super Bowl ended—with 26 seconds left and Seattle one yard away from a go-ahead TD, Patriots corner Malcolm Butler intercepted a pass that Wilson intended for wideout Ricardo Lockette—the Seahawks needed to confront the tension that remained throughout the spring, conflict that was both unmistakable and, until that point, unspoken. "Whatever was lingering from that game," says Wagner, "people got it off their chest."

Wilson spoke. So did receiver Doug Baldwin and safety Kam Chancellor. This went on for 45 minutes until most everyone had said something, harsh words had been exchanged and all grievances had been aired. Players who believed that Seattle's coaches opted to pass—instead of handing off to Marshawn Lynch—to make Wilson the Super Bowl hero said so. Those who felt some teammates had not taken responsibility for what happened said as much. Wilson told Lockette that, faced with the same situation, he would throw to him again, without hesitation. Others focused on what their teammates meant to them, on why they even play football, on how the team needed to remain united and how they would refuse to let one defeat define them. "It gave me chills," says Wilson.

All of the Seahawks' leaders were in attendance, save for Lynch, safety Earl Thomas (who was rehabbing his shoulder) and any linemen. "Part of [the talks were about] the Super Bowl, and the fallout, but most of it was just—we didn't feel like we've reached the sustainable level of success we know we're capable of," says Baldwin. "It wasn't even necessarily about football. It was more about our responsibility as teammates to each other."

"It was, What are you going to fight for? And how are you going to fight for it?"

WILSON ORGANIZES a similar trip each spring, but in the past he has invited only quarterbacks and pass catchers. Run some routes, break some bread, work on timing . . . an offensive tune-up, more or less.

A venture like this year's—a work-vacation with more than half the team, their wives, their children and support staffs—doesn't happen in the NFL. Not with a crowd this size or with position groups this varied. Not with a chartered 737. But Super Bowl XLIX was not a typical defeat, and this was not a typical off-season. That much was evident in the rift that some Seahawks sensed had developed between the offense and defense—no fights or shouting matches or anything like that, but silent tension, an awkwardness to their off-season interactions, the kind of strain that can deepen and wreck even the most promising campaigns. (Wilson, in an interview last week, dismissed the notion of division, but six people

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SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
SEPTEMBER 7, 2015

who went on the trip told SI that it existed.) Even on the flight to Hawaii, most of the defense settled in the back of the plane while most of the offense congregated toward the front.

"Sometimes, you never want it to be this way, but it's offense versus defense," says Baldwin. "That's natu-

ral. But, yes, there was tension. . . . People thinking we should have done this, we should have done that [in the Super Bowl]. There were a lot of questions that needed to be answered. And a lot that needed to be asked."

The jaunt would serve two purposes: help the Seahawks get over the loss and avoid the slow start Seattle suffered in 2014, when, after bludgeoning the Broncos in Super Bowl XLVIII, the team opened 3–3. This loss threatened to be more difficult to overcome than a championship hangover, even if most of the roster had returned intact, and even if Seattle had added Pro Bowl tight end Jimmy Graham from the Saints. That's what Wilson wanted everyone to focus on—not the defeat but how to stop it from unraveling the new season before it began.

Wilson recruited Baldwin, a key locker room voice, and together they approached Chancellor, at which point a plan was hatched. Wilson hadn't yet signed his contract extension and Chancellor hadn't yet decided to hold out for a revised deal—the safety still hasn't reported—but they put their personal business aside. "Kam was pivotal," says Baldwin. "He's like the godfather of the locker room. Any problems, any issues, you go to him."

One week before departure, only a dozen or so Seahawks, mostly offensive skill players, had committed. Enter Chancellor, who urged his defensive teammates to sign on. One who did, linebacker Bruce Irvin, had scuffled with Graham before a game in 2014. That's the kind of relationship the Seahawks wanted to improve on. (In Hawaii, Graham and Irvin hashed out their differences enough to stage a mock fight on Instagram.)

Wilson's manager, Matt Rodgers, and childhood friend Scott Pickett handled the logistics: They booked hotel rooms, planned scuba-diving and whale-watching excursions, and hosted a luau on the roof of their hotel. Wilson, meanwhile, scrutinized every decision, his attention to detail reminding his mental coach, Trevor Moawad, of another client at the Moawad Consulting Group, Nick Saban. The trip unfolded according to a meticulous schedule, with every hour accounted for:



BOWLED OVER

Super Bowl got you down? Try changing positions, as Wilson (above and bottom right) and Sherman did in Hawaii.

**EVEN ON THE FLIGHT,
MOST OF THE D SETTLED IN
THE BACK OF THE PLANE,
THE OFFENSE IN FRONT.**

morning workouts, afternoon outings, dinners at night. Moawad compares the physical, mental and bonding components to work he's done with Special Forces units.

Each night teammates gathered to watch inspirational videos interspersed with clips of Seahawks players in key moments of important games. (In one video sprinter Michael Johnson talked about how he retained his world No. 1 ranking during the 1990s.) After each video a player—Wilson one night, Baldwin another, Chancellor a third—addressed the group.

Still the tension endured. Some players skipped a



handful of workouts. And then, on the sixth day, a Friday, that bus turned and drove up toward the cliff. "It was time for tears to be shed and to let it go," says Lockette. "And that's what we did." The controversial play call, the interception, the defensive breakdowns, the hurt feelings, the second-guessing, the pain, the embarrassment—"We threw all that over the cliff."

THE SEAHAWKS' Hawaiian excursion marked but one stop in Wilson's endless off-season, in which he started dating a pop star, Ciara, hosted Nickelodeon's Kids' Choice Sports Awards and attended a private party at the White House. But whereas everything seemed to go so smoothly following the

Sports Illustrated

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Super Bowl win over Denver, this summer, after the loss to New England, not so much. Wilson found himself in TMZ's crosshairs, photographed with a model in Los Angeles. He was criticized for his prolonged contract negotiations. (In July he signed a four-year, \$87.6 million extension, with more than \$61 million guaranteed.) He was mocked for his insistence—to *Rolling Stone* and on Twitter—that a recovery water possessing something called “nanobubbles” helped him avoid a concussion following a brutal hit in the NFC championship game.

For a celebrity athlete who keeps suits stashed in his Mercedes—in case, you know, he ever needs a tux on a Wednesday—and swaps his iPhone for a Windows model when he attends Microsoft events, these incidents served to remind Wilson that no matter how carefully you craft your image, you can't control how you're perceived. Wilson tuned out his distractions by focusing instead on what he *could* control, arranging the trip to Hawaii and training with a new speed coach, Ryan Flaherty.

Wilson altered his workout routine this off-season. He didn't think it helped him to throw as much as he had last summer with random receivers—guys who

SPLASH, NO PADS

Team Sherman (below, right) took the beach title, but Graham (middle) was happy to settle for a loser's dip.



happened to train at the same facility, as opposed to his own teammates—so he focused more on speed. Starting in early March, up until his Hawaii trip, Wilson met almost daily with Flaherty at the Prolific Athletes facility in Carlsbad, Calif.

Using quantitative analysis, Flaherty focused on improving Wilson's strength-to-weight ratio. End result: Wilson ran a 4.49-second 40-yard dash this summer, six one-hundredths of a second faster than his NFL combine time three years ago. “He's faster and stronger than he's ever been,” Flaherty says.

Flaherty has worked with the likes of Cam Newton, Jameis Winston, Marcus Mariota and Johnny Manziel, but Wilson does not remind him of any other quarterback.

Instead he draws comparisons to two other athletes he trains: Kobe Bryant and Serena Williams. “Russ shares similarities with the best athletes I've trained,” says Flaherty. “Like Serena. They're both obsessed.” That's why, when Wilson went to Hawaii, he took Flaherty with him.

IN THE WEEK before Super Bowl XLIX, friends described Wilson as the happiest they had ever seen him. He was a year removed from a divorce and, at age 26, was already approaching his second title game. He was certain the Seahawks would repeat. Then they lost . . . after he threw the decisive interception.

Publicly Wilson projected confidence. Privately, the Super Bowl defeat had an impact. Those close to him could see how much it hurt. Only Wilson didn't linger on the pain. He looked for a solution. And in the Hawaii trip he found it.

After the meeting on the cliff, the Seahawks' bus drove down the mountain and parked back at the beach. There players found two football fields outlined in the sand, music blasting from large speakers. They split into four teams. The only rule: They couldn't play their regular positions. Chancellor threw passes and Wagner caught them and Wilson defended them.

The winners played the winners and a champion emerged and all the players raced away from the

makeshift fields and jumped into the ocean. To an outsider, it looked like the final, emotional scene from a football movie. “We didn't know if the trip was going to work,” says Baldwin. “We still don't. But we were forced to be vulnerable. And that made us closer.”

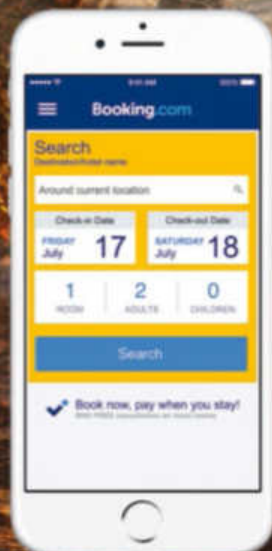
The next day the Seahawks boarded another 737—this one with GO RUSSELL splashed across the side—and flew back toward Seattle. This time offensive and defensive players mingled throughout the plane as it soared over the Pacific Ocean. “You felt a reassurance,” says Lockette, “that we're going to start this year on a clean slate and do everything we can to get back to where we were.

“And win it.”



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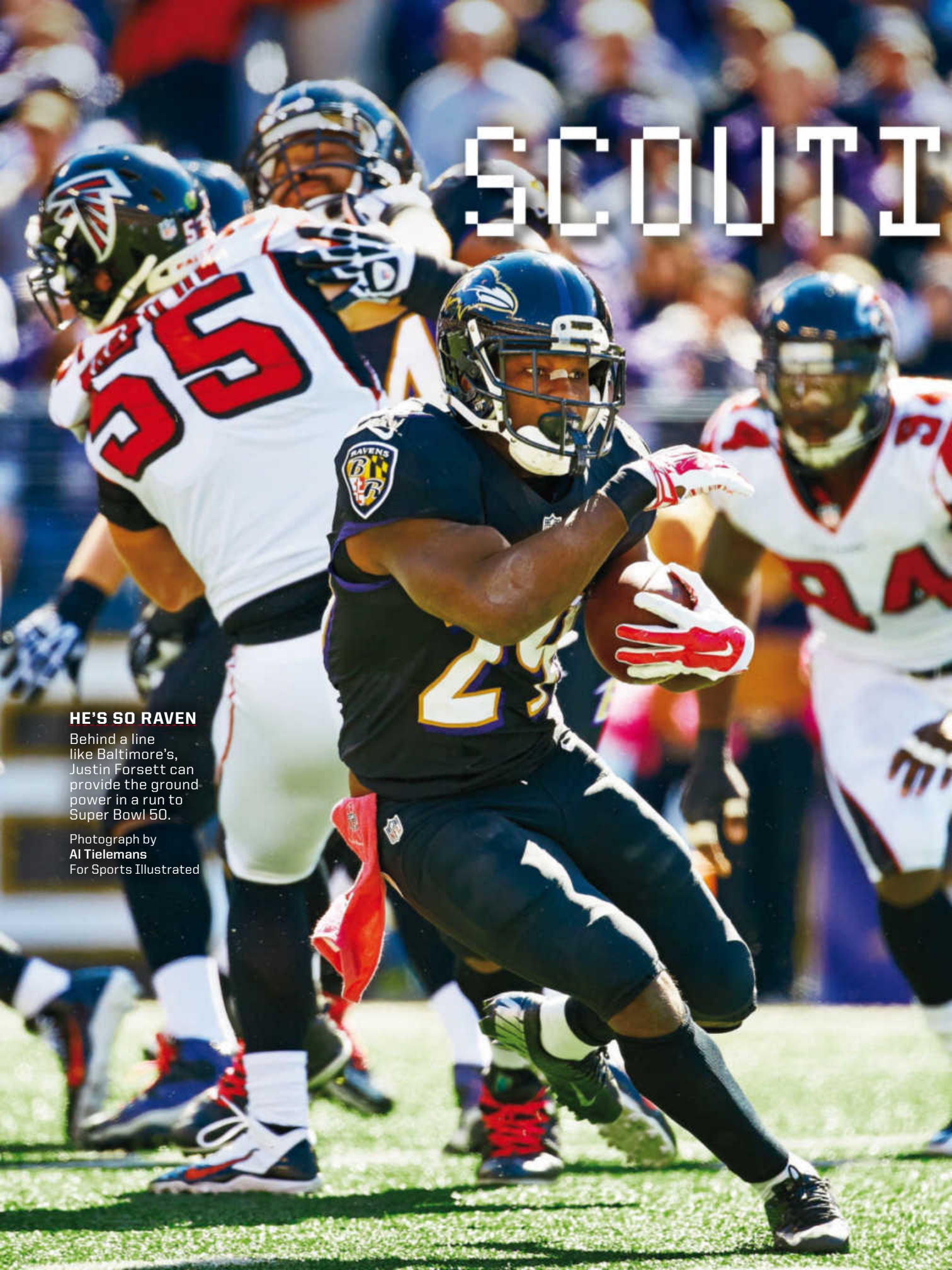
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SCOUTI

A full-page action photograph of Justin Forsett, a running back for the Baltimore Ravens, in a black jersey with the number 24. He is running with the football, looking forward. In the background, Atlanta Falcons players in white jerseys with red numbers are pursuing him. The scene is set on a green football field with a blurred crowd in the stands.

HE'S SO RAVEN

Behind a line like Baltimore's, Justin Forsett can provide the ground power in a run to Super Bowl 50.

Photograph by
Al Tielemans
For Sports Illustrated

NG

R E P O R T S

GREG A. BEDARD'S DIVISION STANDINGS

AFC

EAST

Patriots (2)	12-4
Bills	9-7
Dolphins	7-9
Jets	5-11

NORTH

Ravens (3)	11-5
Steelers (6)	9-7
Bengals	6-10
Browns	6-10

SOUTH

Colts (4)	11-5
Texans (5)	11-5
Titans	3-13
Jaguars	3-13

WEST

Broncos (1)	13-3
Chiefs	9-7
Chargers	8-8
Raiders	4-12

NFC

EAST

Eagles (1)	12-4
Cowboys (5)	11-5
Giants	5-11
Redskins	3-13

NORTH

Packers (2)	12-4
Vikings	10-6
Lions	6-10
Bears	3-13

SOUTH

Panthers (4)	9-7
Saints	9-7
Falcons	6-10
Buccaneers	5-11

WEST

Seahawks (3)	12-4
Rams (6)	11-5
49ers	9-7
Cardinals	5-11

NUMBER IN PARENTHESES:
PLAYOFF SEED



I'M BULLISH on the Ravens. A lot of things need to go right for this team, especially at the offensive skill positions and in the secondary (I'm looking at you, Lardarius Webb), but they're particularly strong in two areas—O-line and D—that are keys to strong postseason runs. I also think the Ravens are due for some luck. Meaning: They're unlikely to suffer as many crucial injuries as they did in 2014.

That's the type of rationale that last year led me to pick the Patriots to play the Seahawks in Super Bowl XLIX. New England had fallen in the previous year's AFC title game with a rash of injuries; just a few healthy players would have pushed them to the top. They won it all last year, but remember: They needed total health and some well-timed trickery to get past

a very beat-up Ravens team in their divisional playoff game. If Baltimore has health on its side, this team has the toughness to march through a wide-open AFC. The Broncos have the most talent, and their switch of defensive coordinators from the uninspired Jack Del Rio to the zany Wade Phillips will help immensely, but I'm not convinced Peyton Manning can get it done late in the year anymore. The Patriots' talent drain in the secondary can be covered up in the regular season, but not in the postseason against the best QBs. Joe Flacco, who owns a career 91.3 rating against New England and who carved up the Patriots' best secondary in years last January before a last-gasp interception, should find a weakened defense even more inviting this season. The Steelers and the Colts? They're both a year away on defense.

I don't know what to make of the NFC. Injuries have deeply hurt the Packers (Jordy Nelson) and the Cowboys (Orlando Scandrick), and the Eagles are too dependent on Sam Bradford's health. The Seahawks still have the talent and the coaching to become the first team in the salary-cap era to make it to three straight title games. But the Ravens are the type of team that can shut down Marshawn Lynch and make enough plays against Seattle's D to win a tight Super Bowl. Baltimore is the most well-rounded team, one that has a lot to prove given how last season ended. —G.B.

PLAYOFFS

AFC

WILD CARD

RAVENS 34, STEELERS 30
COLTS 23, TEXANS 20

DIVISIONAL ROUND

BRONCOS 27, COLTS 17
RAVENS 37, PATRIOTS 34

CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

RAVENS 20, BRONCOS 17

NFC

WILD CARD

SEAHAWKS 17, RAMS 16
PANTHERS 26, COWBOYS 18

DIVISIONAL ROUND

EAGLES 27, PANTHERS 24
SEAHAWKS 20, PACKERS 17

CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

SEAHAWKS 23, EAGLES 10

SUPER BOWL 50

Feb. 7, 2016
Levi's Stadium,
Santa Clara, Calif.

RAVENS 23
SEAHAWKS 20


AFC
EAST

 2014
 Record:
12-4

New England Patriots



NOT THE SAME OLD STORY

When the Patriots delivered their first Lombardi Trophy in 10 years, it was the veterans who led them. There was Tom Brady's usual brilliance, especially in the second half of Super Bowl XLIX. On the lines, New England would have come up short if then-33-year-old Vince Wilfork hadn't plugged the run and if 32-year-old Dan Connolly hadn't stabilized the left guard position. If press-man specialists Darrelle Revis, 29, and Brandon Browner, 30, had signed elsewhere in free agency, the Patriots would not have been able to play the types of coverages that made everyone—especially safety Patrick Chung and linebacker Jamie Collins—better.

But if New England is to become the first repeat champion in 11 years, the team's emerging young stars will have to do more of the heavy lifting. Nowhere will there be more shuffling than in the secondary. Revis, who went back to the Jets, was a steal for the \$12 million the Patriots paid for his lone season of service. Once

JOHN W. McDONOUGH FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (LEFT); JIM MAHONEY/AP
P. 72

 SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
 SEPTEMBER 7, 2013

2013 SCHEDULE
SI'S PREDICTION: 12-4

■ HOME □ AWAY

SEPT. 10



THURSDAY

SEPT. 20



SEPT. 27



OCT. 4



OCT. 11



the physical, lengthy Browner returned to the lineup in Week 7, New England was free to basically play with one deep safety. That freed up Collins and Chung to play man-for-man, which accentuated their strengths.

With Revis, Browner (Saints) and third corner Kyle Arrington (Ravens) having moved on, it will be up to Super Bowl hero Malcolm Butler, Logan Ryan and one of two reclamation projects—Bradley Fletcher or Tarell Brown—to pick up the enormous slack. Butler had a terrific training camp, using his speed and burst to make life difficult for Brady. Ryan was steady but unspectacular. Brown was the better of the veterans, and the Patriots have a strong track record of not asking players to do more than they're capable of. At safety, Harmon and second-round pick Jordan Richards (Stanford) could see increased reps if the Pats need to play more with two deep men, which is not Chung's strength.



THEMMQB.COM INSIDER

ANDY BENOIT ON THE PATRIOTS' BIG WEAK SPOT

There's no way the Patriots would have won the Super Bowl last February without the cornerbacks they had. That started with the game's best player at the position, Darrelle Revis. He was stifling in man-to-man. That afforded coach Bill Belichick more freedom and aggression in the deployment of his other corners, Brandon Browner and Kyle Arrington. But now all three are gone. New England's top corner entering 2015 is Malcolm Butler *(above)*,

who overachieved as an undrafted rookie, but who also went undrafted for a reason. Don't expect Butler to assume Revis's Cover Zero-man duties. In fact, don't expect this unit to play much man coverage at all. The Pats' next best corner, Logan Ryan, has been benched multiple times. Behind him, newcomers Bradley Fletcher (formerly of the Eagles), Tarell Brown (Raiders) and Robert McClain (Falcons) were all dumped by other teams. This, frankly, is one of the NFL's

worst cornerback groups. And, in turn, a light now gets shined on the fact that New England's pass rush isn't particularly strong. That group got to the quarterback last season, but often on the strength of man coverage that held up for insane amounts of time. This year, man coverage is no longer an every-down option.

A green secondary will look a lot better if New England's front seven delivers the kind of pressure that, on paper, it should. It's time for 2012 first-round pick Chandler Jones, who's rangy and explosive, to become a dominating every-down pass rusher at end. Free-agent pickup Jabaal Sheard, Cleveland's second-round pick in '11, will bring pressure on the other side, rotating with Rob Ninkovich. Tackle Dominique Easley, a first-round pick in '14, didn't contribute much as a rookie, but he has an explosive first step that will be a challenge for any blocking scheme. Alongside Easley, the Patriots are hoping Malcolm Brown, a first-round pick out of Texas, can help fill Wilfork's void as a strong inside presence.

The glue of the front seven is the linebacking tandem of Collins and Dont'a Hightower, who emerged last season as disruptive playmakers. Collins, an athletic freak, put his immense tools to work once Revis and Browner locked down the man coverage, and he finished the season with four sacks, four forced fumbles and two interceptions. He's tough to block on blitzes, and his length in coverage bothers QBs. Hightower, meanwhile, made most people forget about Jerod Mayo (right knee) after assuming his middle 'backer role in Week 7. Hightower was steady against the run, but his six sacks took the position to another level. With Mayo back to health, his run-stopping strength allows the Patriots to turn Hightower and Collins—both natural pass rushers—loose even more often.

Offensively, the line will again be a focal point after a near-disaster start in 2014, when the Patriots began 2-2. The tide turned when the lineup of Nate Solder, Connolly, Bryan Stork, Ryan Wendell and Sebastian Vollmer first played together, in Week 5, and New England won 13 of its last 15 games. Stork, tough and heady, was a revelation as a rookie center and looks as if he'll be a fixture for years. But with Connolly retired, you may see fourth-round pick Tre' Jackson (Florida State) start at guard.

The passing offense will come together as soon as Brady returns from suspension, whenever that is (his Deflategate ban remained unresolved as of Monday), and will feature old standbys Julian Edelman and Danny Amendola, plus late-camp signee Reggie Wayne alongside hulking tight ends Rob Gronkowski and Scott Chandler, snagged from the Bills in free agency. Expect New England to operate through the Gronk-Chandler twin towers plenty in the red zone.

The Patriots, seemingly as in every other season, will be in contention for the Super Bowl. How their young guns develop on both sides of the ball will determine whether they can repeat. —Greg A. Bedard

—Greg A. Bedard



AFC
EAST

2014
Record:
9-7

Buffalo Bills



GROUND AND POUND

There's a well-worn adage in football: When you have two quarterbacks, you really have *no* quarterback. The Bills, in fact, have three quarterbacks—Tyrod Taylor, Matt Cassel and EJ Manuel, all of whom could start at some point—but they really have no quarterback. General manager Doug Whaley freely admits the lack of an established signal-caller is his team's biggest hindrance. For more than a decade Buffalo has been just talented enough to miss out on the top quarterbacks in the draft, but not good enough to break through to the playoffs. The Bills haven't made the postseason since 1999, cycling through 13 leading men in the last 15 years. They'll enter Week 1 with Taylor (a career backup to Joe Flacco) under center, but don't be surprised if at some point this year you see Manuel (Buffalo's 2013 first-round pick) or Cassel (a 10-year journeyman) swapped in. "Obviously it's not an ideal situation," new coach Rex Ryan has said of his

KEVIN HOFMAN/USA TODAY SPORTS (LEFT); KELLEN MCMAN/CON SPORTSWIRE

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SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
SEPTEMBER 7, 2015

2015 SCHEDULE

SI'S PREDICTION: 9-7

SEPT. 13



SEPT. 20



SEPT. 27



OCT. 4



OCT. 11



QB situation. “But we have enough talent to be fine.”

Whaley has attempted to mitigate his quarterback woes by committing to a ground-and-pound offense. He hired offensive coordinator Greg Roman from San Francisco, where he guided the 49ers to 8,912 rushing yards over the past four seasons, the second-best mark in the NFL. Roman’s offense is built on deception through various presnap motions and formation changes. Two-time All-Pro running back LeSean McCoy, acquired in a surprising off-season trade with the Eagles, will be the centerpiece and shoulder the bulk of the carries. But the depth chart behind McCoy is thin—career backups Anthony Dixon and Bryce Brown; fifth-round pick Karlos Williams (Florida State)—and the Bills could sink if, say, the hamstringing McCoy injured in camp hampers him this season.

Roman’s offense will also heavily feature tight

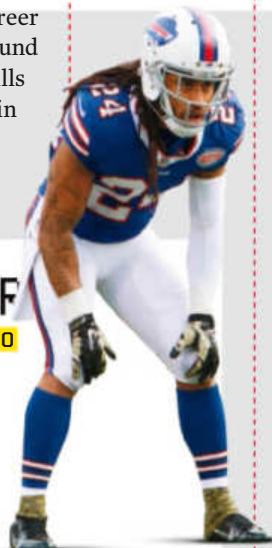
THEMMQB.COM INSIDE

ANDY BENOIT ON THE BILLS’ SHUTDOWN SCENARIO

If Rex Ryan at some point says that Bills cornerback Stephon Gilmore (*above*) is in the same class as Darrelle Revis, he won’t just be blowing some of that charming—or annoying, depending on your perspective—Rex Ryan smoke. Gilmore, a first-round pick in 2012, has the long arms, raw strength and short-area quickness and control to be a shutdown corner. A shutdown corner shrinks the field, and Ryan’s man-coverage-intensive scheme

is predicated on having one. When his top corner can keep a receiver locked down, Ryan goes to his nickel and dime sub-packages and deploys aggressive pressures and inside coverage rotations designed for a more confined area. He blitzes, though not as much as you might think. You’ll often see his Bills rush just four players, but one or two of them will come from the linebacker or safety positions. They’ll be replaced in coverage by defensive linemen

and outside linebackers who are dropping back. This tactic, known as a zone exchange, is a pillar in Ryan’s system. It creates the illusion of complexity and makes a quarterback play fast. When a quarterback plays fast and sees his best receiver stifled by a press corner, that’s when he’s in trouble.



ends—a shift for Buffalo—and the Bills targeted former Dolphin Charles Clay as their big off-season investment, signing him for five years at \$38 million. Whaley’s other free-agency signings were less costly but riskier (and that’s not including waiver claim IK Enemkpali, the reserve linebacker who was released from the Jets after cold-cocking quarterback Geno Smith). Guard Richie Incognito, who was effectively blackballed from the league for his role in the Dolphins’ 2013 bullying scandal, was brought in to shore up the line. Percy Harvin, the elusive receiver who has burned through four teams in four years and has not been a factor since the first half of ’12, signed a one-year deal.

Harvin, the 2009 Rookie of the Year, has been used mostly in gadget-type roles. One reason he chose the Bills was their commitment to lining him up out wide. “We’re not going to lose the fact that he can be a weapon in other areas,” says receivers coach Sanjay Lal, alluding to Harvin’s prowess on kick returns, among other things. “But Percy is a wideout with us. And he’s going to be a good one.”

He joins one of the league’s most promising tandems in 22-year-old Sammy Watkins and 23-year-old Robert Woods. The Bills will need to figure out how to keep all of their targets happy—once they figure out who is throwing them the ball.

On defense the biggest addition may be Ryan, the brash coach known for creating a feared pass rush. (It was the only constant for the Jets during Ryan’s turbulent six-year tenure.) After inheriting a Bills team that ranked fourth in total defense last season, with three Pro Bowlers in its front seven, Ryan, true to character, called being in the top four “a little disappointing.” “Our expectation is to be No. 1,” Ryan says.

The Bills’ switch from a straight 4–3 in 2014 to Ryan’s preferred 3–4 base won’t be a huge issue; in ’13, Buffalo used a similar scheme under defensive coordinator (and Ryan disciple) Mike Pettine. Defensive tackles Kyle Williams and Marcell Dareus will fortify the interior while Mario Williams shifts from defensive end back to linebacker, where he and Jerry Hughes will have more one-on-one chances off the edge. Hughes, who signed a five-year, \$45 million contract this off-season, is already thriving. During a May minicamp Ryan benched the 27-year-old for “ruining practice” because he kept sacking the quarterback.

Ryan has promised the playoffs, and fans have bought in, with ticket sales running high. But the coach will need that quarterback—Taylor, or whoever supplants him—to get there.

—Emily Kaplan

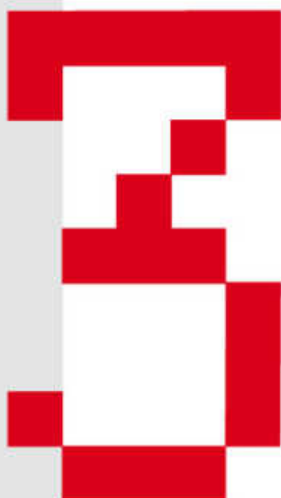
OCT. 18	OCT. 25	NOV. 1	NOV. 8	NOV. 12	NOV. 23	NOV. 29	DEC. 6	DEC. 13	DEC. 20	DEC. 27	JAN. 3
CIN L	JAX W	BYE	MIA W	NYJ W	NE L	KC L	HOU W	PHI L	WAS L	DAL W	NYJ W
	IN LONDON			THURSDAY							



AFC
EAST

2014
Record:
8-8

Miami Dolphins



TIME TO DELIVER

In theory the Dolphins should contend with the Super Bowl–champion Patriots in the AFC East and be a threat for a deep playoff run—but *theory* is an empty word in this NFL.

Miami has made glacial progress over the past three years. After a 6–10 finish in 2011, coach Tony Sparano's final season, the Dolphins improved to 7–9 in Joe Philbin's first campaign, then to 8–8 in each of the past two. Philbin, for one, might point out that, even though last season didn't represent any improvement in terms of wins and losses, his team did go from a minus-18 point differential in '13 to plus-15 in '14.

That's progress. Slow progress.

But in perhaps the most important area, the innards that make one team a winner and another a loser, the Dolphins are still the Dolphins. Two years ago, after upsetting the Pats in Week 15, Miami was 8–6, only to fall on its face, losing its last two games by a

BILL FRANKS FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (LEFT); SCOTT BOEHM/AP

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SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
SEPTEMBER 7, 2015

2015 SCHEDULE

SI'S PREDICTION: 7-9

SEPT. 13



SEPT. 20



SEPT. 27



OCT. 4



OCT. 11



■ HOME □ AWAY

IN LONDON

combined score of 39–7 and missing the playoffs. Last season? Same thing. The Fins were 7–5 before—*splat* again—three losses in their final four games and a January spent at home.

So, here we go again. Even owner Stephen Ross, who has poured millions into renovating Sun Life Stadium and his roster, says “you’re goddam right,” he’s getting antsy for winning results. His players and coaches know it.

Says quarterback Ryan Tannehill: “That’s his expectation, that’s our expectation. That’s what we’ve been working to do. We haven’t gotten it done the past few years, but I feel like we have every piece we need.”

Much of the focus will be on Tannehill and whether he continues to progress, especially in a second season under coordinator Bill Lazor. Tannehill has improved in each of his three years as a starter:



THEMMQB.COM INSIDER

ANDY BENOIT ON THE DOLPHINS' RISKY INVESTMENT

Defensive tackle Ndamukong Suh (*above*) became the splashiest (read: most expensive) free-agent signing this off-season when the ex-Lion joined the Dolphins for a staggering \$60 million guaranteed. Suh, it is hoped, will fortify what was already a strong pass rush (ends Cameron Wake and Olivier Vernon are both superb off the edge) and aid a run defense that, in each of the three years under coach Joe Philbin, has worn down at season's end. With

his quickness off the snap and raw physical strength, plus his keen technique and willingness to do the dirty work, Suh can redefine this defense by getting penetration and negating the need to blitz. Coordinator Kevin Coyle can now keep more bodies back in coverage. But is this *really* worth guaranteeing \$60 million? The Dolphins remain weak in the secondary, and it will be hard to rectify this in future years. In 2016, Suh

alone will take up an estimated 19.1% of Miami's salary cap. The next highest cap percentage among NFL defensive tackles belongs to the Buccaneers' Gerald McCoy, at 8.7%. The Dolphins spent megabucks to amplify a strength (their front four), but it came at the expense of multiple other weaknesses.

His completion percentage, yards, TDs and passer rating have all increased, while his interceptions dropped from his rookie total. Now he has targets to burn in veteran receivers Greg Jennings (a free-agency pickup from the Vikings) and Kenny Stills (trade with the Saints), second-year talent Jarvis Landry and 2015 first-round pick DeVante Parker (Louisville), plus free-agent tight end Jordan Cameron (Browns). The line should continue to improve with the trio of left tackle Branden Albert, center Mike Pouncey and right tackle Ja'Wuan James. Running back Lamar Miller is better than most realize.

There's no justification for the offense failing. If the Dolphins are to make the move from preseason pretender to postseason contender, it's going to fall on two areas: Philbin and the defense.

Miami has lost steady ground on D, giving up more points each subsequent season under fourth-year coordinator Kevin Coyle, who was in step with Tannehill when he said in camp, “I expect us to be a dominant defense and I believe we have the pieces that can do that.”

There's no bigger piece, literally and figuratively, than former Lions defensive tackle Ndamukong Suh, a four-time Pro Bowler who was given the biggest non-quarterback contract ever: \$114.375 million over six years. Putting Suh—and a mix of Earl Mitchell, 2015 second-round pick Jordan Phillips (Oklahoma) and former Lion C.J. Mosley—in between standout ends Cameron Wake and Olivier Vernon should give the Dolphins one of the league's top units.

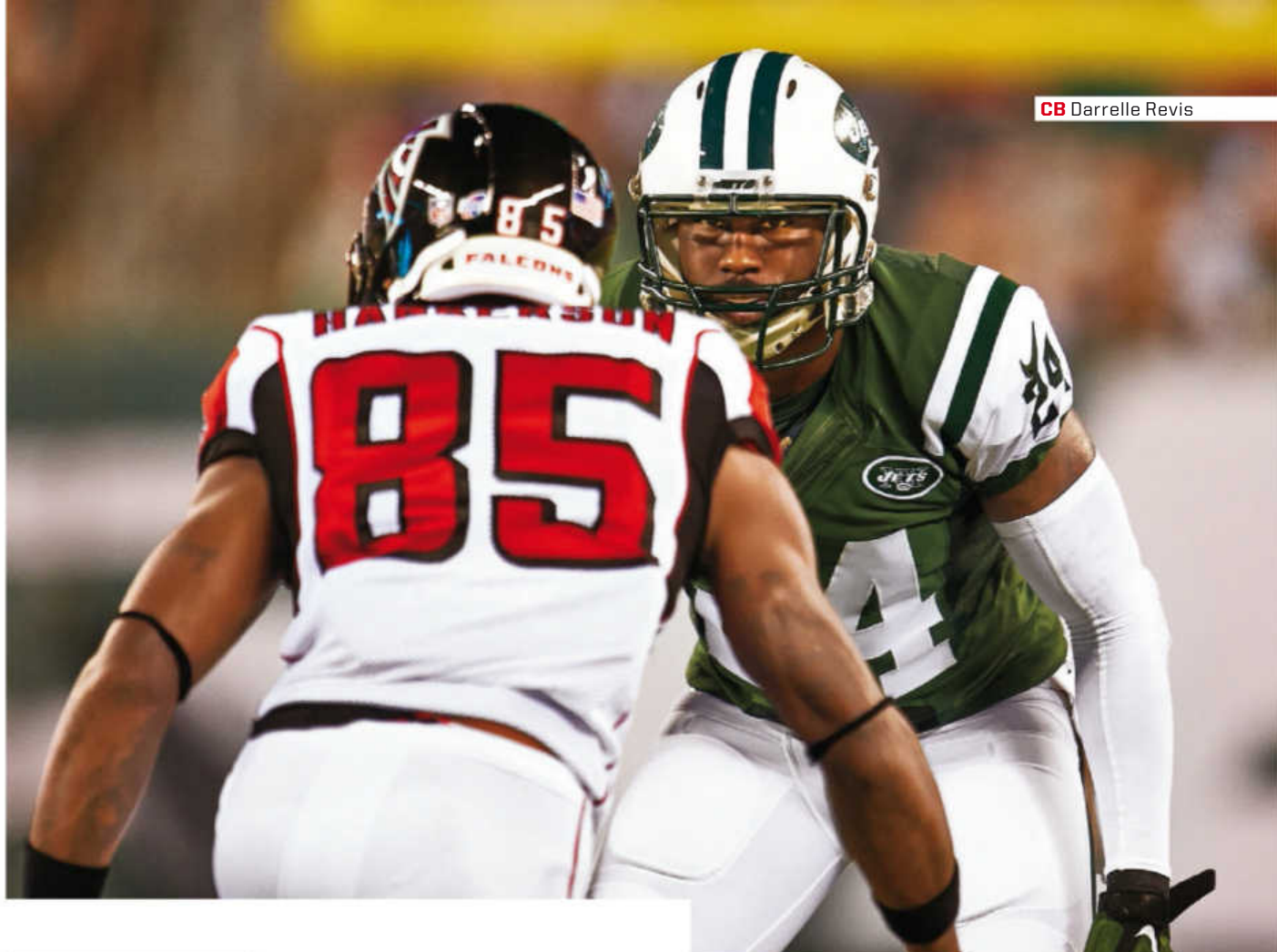
But the linebacking corps, the lifeblood in Coyle's 4–3 defense, is a mix of young and unproven. And the secondary, outside of cornerback Brent Grimes and safety Reshad Jones, is stocked with middling veterans. This D is certainly capable of playing winning football, but it hasn't put it all together yet.

The same could be said for the entire Dolphins roster, which means that much of the pressure falls on Philbin. The former Packers offensive coordinator is already on borrowed time. With ex-Jets general manager Mike Tannenbaum installed as a heavy-handed executive vice president of football operations, Philbin is now working with his third personnel chief. That's almost unheard of in this league. Tannenbaum's prints are all over these Dolphins, so it's likely playoffs or bust for Philbin.

There won't be any excuses for Miami this season. The pieces are in place on offense and, largely, on defense. The Patriots aren't as strong in the secondary, and that's a major vulnerability; the Jets and the Bills continue to deal with quarterback issues. The division's there for the Dolphins. In theory.

—G.B.




AFC
EAST

 2014
 Record:
4-12

New York Jets

4

THIS FEELS FAMILIAR

There were sweeping changes this off-season in Florham Park, N.J., but will that mean much of a transformation in terms of wins and losses for the Jets? Coach Rex Ryan and general manager John Idzik were offed after a 4-12 season—the franchise's fourth straight without a playoff berth—and replaced by former Cardinals defensive coordinator Todd Bowles and Mike Maccagnan, the Texans' director of college scouting. Like their predecessors, Bowles and Maccagnan are in their positions for the first time in their careers.

On the field the Jets addressed defensive deficiencies by bringing back stud corners Darrelle Revis and Antonio Cromartie, who thrived together in New York's secondary from 2010 to '12. They also added underrated Browns corner Buster Skrine, a tough, versatile gamer who can also play safety; and they used the No. 6 pick on powerful USC D-lineman Leonard Williams, whose rare size-speed combo will make him a matchup nightmare.

CARLOS M. SANCHEZ FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (2)

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 SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
 SEPTEMBER 7, 2013

2013 SCHEDULE
SI'S PREDICTION: 5-11

SEPT. 13



SEPT. 21



MONDAY

SEPT. 27



OCT. 4



IN LONDON

OCT. 11



■ HOME □ AWAY

So, just like Ryan's Jets, Gang Green is stacked on defense, even with Sheldon Richardson suspended for the first four games of the season for violating the NFL's substance abuse policy. (With Muhammad Wilkerson, Damon Harrison and Williams on that line, New York will easily absorb the blow.) Outside of their line the Jets are lacking edge rushers, but manufacturing pressure and confusing the QB is Bowles's specialty: His Arizona units ranked fifth and seventh in points allowed. Safety, however, will continue to be an issue after Antonio Allen was lost for the season with a right-Achilles injury.

And just like Ryan's Jets, New York will be hoping and wishing that QB Geno Smith (in his third season) makes the leap, if not to stardom, at least to consistency. That prayer seems unlikely to be answered after Smith had his jaw broken in an altercation with a teammate. Smith, who is not expected back until



THEMMQB.COM INSIDER

ANDY BENOIT ON THE JETS' NEW DEFENSIVE AGGRESSOR

Ask an NFL coach which unit on an opposing team—offense or defense—most impressed him from a schematic standpoint last year, and there's a good chance he'll say Arizona's D. That group's coordinator, Todd Bowles, was the prize coaching candidate of this off-season because he's mastered myriad designer pressure concepts. While many coaches save their most aggressive blitzes for select situations, Bowles unleashes his anytime, anywhere. That threat lends

legitimacy to his presnap blitz looks—even the ones that are merely meant to intimidate. For Bowles, generating pressure is all about controlling the action, not just creating sacks. His scheme doesn't require an expensive edge rusher. Instead, he uses linebackers and D-backs on blitzes, often up the middle, where they can cover ground the quickest and best obscure a QB's vision. This requires corners who win in isolation on the outside; hence the signings of Darrelle

Revis and Antonio Cromartie. It also requires putting the opposing offense in passing situations to begin with; hence the drafting, at No. 6, of USC defensive lineman Leonard Williams (*above*), despite the Jets already having one of the league's most vociferous fronts. On top of all else, it requires a coach who's willing to make the aggressive call.

mid-October, had stretches last year when he played well, but he's been prone to the big mistake, having thrown picks in 22 of his 29 starts while losing seven fumbles.

To help Smith, the Jets have created a more QB-friendly environment, both in terms of talent and coaching. Maccagnan boldly traded a fifth-round pick for five-time Pro Bowl receiver Brandon Marshall to supplement holdovers Eric Decker and Jeremy Kerley, and he used a second-round pick on Ohio State deep threat Devin Smith. A change at coordinator should also give Geno Smith the best chance at success in a make-or-break campaign once he returns. In his first two seasons, he played for Marty Mornhinweg, and while the coach's strong belief in the West Coast offense worked for some QBs (*see*: McNabb, Donovan), it seemed to be a strange fit for the freewheeling Smith, and that was borne out by his performance. Two years after being fired as the Bills' coach, Chan Gailey is back in the NFL as the Jets' offensive coordinator. Gailey has a great track record of accommodating his system to the strengths of his passers. Smith will receive top-notch tutelage, but he won't be given more than he can handle, which was a problem with Mornhinweg's system. Gailey will spread the field and give Smith more defined reads. "As far as taking care of the football, I'm seeing things better, I'm not feeling as rushed, I'm just more comfortable in the pocket," Smith said in camp. "I feel like I know the timing of when things should develop and when to get the ball out of my hands."

One major difference from the previous Jets regime: Maccagnan hasn't placed the entire burden on Smith's shoulders, as Ryan did with Sanchez. New York traded for veteran QB Ryan Fitzpatrick, who had success with Gailey in Buffalo—and who will now get the nod, at least until Smith returns. (They also used a fourth-round pick on Baylor star Bryce Petty; he'll need extensive work transitioning to a pro offense, but he's worth developing.)

Still, you can expect the Jets, who finished No. 3 in rushing last season, to be a run-first team. They boast talented backs—Chris Ivory, Bilal Powell, Zac Stacy, Stevan Ridley, in order of likely impact—and a line whose addition of former Seahawk James Carpenter at left guard should help aging left tackle D'Brickashaw Ferguson.

With Ryan's bombastic nature replaced by Bowles's stern, nose-to-the-grindstone approach, and a capable personnel man running the front office, the Jets might seem like a franchise on the rise. But their hopes are again riding on a questionable quarterback, one whose timetable has been pushed back by a training camp fight. Has all that much really changed? —G.B.

OCT. 18	OCT. 25	NOV. 1	NOV. 8	NOV. 12	NOV. 22	NOV. 29	DEC. 6	DEC. 13	DEC. 19	DEC. 27	JAN. 3
WAS 	NE 	OAK 	JAX 	BUF 	HOU 	MIA 	NYG 	TEN 	DAL 	NE 	BUF 
				THURSDAY					SATURDAY		


AFC
NORTH

 2014
 Record:
10-6

Baltimore Ravens



LOOK OF A CHAMP

The chatter about the Ravens this season will be centered on the offense. It's a relevant topic considering that Gary Kubiak revived this unit in his one season as Baltimore's OC, then left to become coach of the Broncos this year. In his place, John Harbaugh hired pass-happy former Bears coach Marc Trestman to up the vertical game.

It's the Ravens' defense, however, that will be the biggest factor in SI's anointing of Baltimore as its Super Bowl pick. Last season the Ravens had the best D, in both points and yards, in the AFC North, even with several injuries in the secondary, including top cornerback Jimmy Smith, who went down with a left Lisfranc tear in Week 8. So underwhelming was their set of safeties heading into the season—Matt Elam and Darian Stewart—that problem child Will Hill had to be signed off the street last July, despite his having a six-game suspension (for a failed

TOMMY GILLIS/USA TODAY SPORTS

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 SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
 SEPTEMBER 7, 2013

2013 SCHEDULE
SI'S PREDICTION: 11-5

SEPT. 13



SEPT. 20



SEPT. 27



OCT. 1



OCT. 11



■ HOME □ AWAY

THURSDAY

Sports Illustrated
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Sports Illustrated
P R E S E N T S

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2015

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Team's Offense

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Of Every
Draftable Player

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And Busts You
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tight end



PETERSON
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strong return



GORDON
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of the year



BRYANT
Definitely
a catch



MO
Fo

drug test) coming. He proved a dramatic upgrade.

Smith, who received a four-year, \$48 million contract extension in the off-season, is now healthy. When he and Lardarius Webb (who dealt with a hamstring issue through the preseason) are on the field, they are among the better cornerbacks in the league. They are physical and nasty, and they match up with any receiver. "We can lock down the outside," Webb says. "That means the defense can do a lot of different things." Adding depth to Baltimore's secondary is Kyle Arrington, who was mysteriously released by the Patriots in May with two years left on his contract. Arrington was benched against Seattle in the Super Bowl, but over his six-year career he's proved to be a solid and versatile defensive back and a key special teams player.

At safety, Elam is expected to miss the season with a



THEMMQB.COM INSIDER

ANDY BENOIT ON THE UNDERAPPRECIATED JOE FLACCO

How is it that so few recognize Joe Flacco as a superstar? Not only does he have the size and the arm to thread balls against tight man coverage, but he's also intelligent, as evidenced by the way he dissects zones. Flacco (*above*) even checks off the ridiculously overemphasized "he's a winner" box, with a career postseason record of 10-5 that includes an NFL-record seven road victories and a Super Bowl MVP. This season the 30-year-old will

be playing for his fourth offensive coordinator in as many years. That's not ideal, given that last season under Gary Kubiak (now Denver's coach) the Ravens set franchise records for points and yards. But new coordinator (and former Bears coach) Marc Trestman, while one of the game's most innovative minds, will keep intact the zone-running concepts that Kubiak employed and that running back Justin Forsett and his outstanding O-line executed

so expertly in 2014. Many of last season's play-action packages will also stay. (They're built off the zone stretch runs.) The only change might be through the air, with a slight increase in vertical route combinations—Trestman's specialty. With a bona fide superstar at QB, there's nothing the Ravens can't try.

torn biceps, but the Ravens might be better off without him. Stewart left for Denver but has been replaced by former Texans safety Kendrick Lewis, whom the coaches have raved about for being the kind of smart, tough and instinctive leader the group has lacked since Ed Reed departed. Lewis complements the athletic play of Hill, a strong safety who can both hit and cover.

Up front the Ravens will have to overcome the loss of stalwart tackle Haloti Ngata, who was traded to the Lions when Baltimore couldn't navigate his \$16 million cap figure. In the short term the Ravens will be worse off without Ngata, but they have been preparing for this. Third-year tackle Brandon Williams is a bull, 2014 second-round pick Timmy Jernigan has the makings of a star at end, and opposite him veteran Chris Canty is still tough to move. It hurt to lose promising end Brent Urban to a training camp injury, but Baltimore has good depth with third-year end Kapron Lewis-Moore and defensive tackle Carl Davis, a third-round pick from Iowa whose physicality matches his 6' 5", 320-pound size. In college his work ethic was questioned, but the Ravens are privately ecstatic about what they've seen in camp.

The starting outside linebackers remain a position of strength. Terrell Suggs and Elvis Dumervil are both over 30, but last year they combined for 29 sacks, which made them the most prolific duo in the league. There's little doubt that Pernell McPhee, who had been the unit's Swiss Army knife, will be missed after signing with Chicago, and it's up to fourth-year player Courtney Upshaw to pick up McPhee's role in the base defense. Upshaw hasn't stood out against the run or the pass and remains a work in progress.

At inside linebacker, C.J. Mosley received most of the press last year, finishing second to the Rams' Aaron Donald in Defensive Rookie of the Year voting, but 33-year-old Daryl Smith held the unit together with his communication, play recognition against the run and his underrated coverage abilities.

The Steelers are loaded on offense, and if Bengals quarterback Andy Dalton ever gets it, Cincinnati will be tough to stop. Throughout the rest of the conference, Denver remains a formidable test, but the Colts (not enough line talent) and the Patriots (who lost corners Darrelle Revis and Brandon Browner) might not have enough to match up with Baltimore. Yes, the Ravens' offense has issues to work out, starting with the integration of Trestman's scheme, but the defense, if healthy, could take this team to its second Super Bowl in four years.

—G.B.

SIMON BRUTY FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

OCT. 18



OCT. 26



MONDAY

NOV. 1



NOV. 8



NOV. 15



NOV. 22



NOV. 30



MONDAY

DEC. 6



DEC. 13



DEC. 20



DEC. 27



JAN. 3



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WR Antonio Brown

AFC
NORTH

2014
Record:
11-5

Pittsburgh Steelers



A WHOLE NEW LOOK

Forget the Steel Curtain. Blitzburgh too. It's a new day for the Steelers; 2015 is all about the offense. The question is: Can this unfamiliar formula—outscore an opponent instead of suffocating him—deliver a Super Bowl title, as the D did twice in the past decade? Doubtful. But Pittsburgh has never seen an O this good.

The conversion of styles started last year when the offense went from a middling unit to one that rewrote the franchise record books in points (27.3), yards (411.1) and first downs (23.7) per game. The D, meanwhile, slipped to 18th in both points and yards. And the Steelers entered camp with all 11 offensive starters back for the first time since 1982, which means QB Ben Roethlisberger and coordinator Todd Haley are in the driver's seat. It wasn't all that long ago, though—the middle of the 2013 season—that it looked as if Haley wouldn't survive. Pittsburgh had started 0-4, then 2-5, as the O averaged an anemic 179 points per game. That the Steel-

JASON BRIDGE/USA TODAY SPORTS (LEFT); CHARLES LECLAU/USA TODAY SPORTS

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SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
SEPTEMBER 7, 2015

2015 SCHEDULE

SI'S PREDICTION: 9-7

■ HOME □ AWAY

SEPT. 10



THURSDAY

SEPT. 20



SEPT. 27



OCT. 1



THURSDAY

OCT. 12



MONDAY

ers finished out 6–3 while averaging 28.2 points didn't entirely soothe everyone, but patience was rewarded over the course of the season. And after an explosive '14 the front office handed Haley a two-year contract.

"We have a lot of people back," the coordinator says. "Guys like [second-year receiver] Martavis Bryant, [third-year receiver] Markus Wheaton and [third-year running back] Le'Veon Bell. The fact that they are more comfortable and understand how we are trying to do things, that will only help them have a chance to be better."

The key to the Steelers' offensive resurgence? Health, improved protection for Roethlisberger, and talent. It's difficult to find a more well-rounded group in the NFL. That starts with Big Ben, who has always been accurate, tough and difficult to sack. But in Haley's quick passing attack, his skills have been magnified. Former coordinator Bruce Arians



THEMMQB.COM INSIDER

ANDY BENOIT ON THE STEELERS' DEFENSIVE EVOLUTION

There's a reason you haven't seen rookies, even first- and second-rounders, playing heavy snaps in Pittsburgh's 3-4 defense over the years: Its complicated matchup zone principles and blitz exchanges make it arguably football's most difficult system to master. Once you catch on, you have a chance to be a 10-year starter, even a perennial Pro Bowler. But the learning process is humbling. In 2015 it will be interesting to see who Keith

Butler—the Steelers' longtime linebackers coach tabbed to replace Dick LeBeau—puts on the field. Butler faces an issue that LeBeau rarely encountered: a paucity of talent. Most of Pittsburgh's storied veterans of the past decade are gone. The secondary, headlined by Mike Mitchell (*above*)—a free safety who should be playing strong safety—and a handful of youthful or ill-equipped corners, will be a problem. The only way to keep these guys unexposed is

to create pressure. But the guys most physically equipped to do that are unproven first-round picks: class of '13 outside linebacker Jarvis Jones; '15 outside 'backer Bud Dupree (Kentucky); '14 inside 'backer Ryan Shazier (as a blitzer); and '14 end Stephon Tuitt, who was a second-rounder. Butler will have to rely on at least some—maybe all—of these guys.

(now in Arizona) could direct a unit, but his old-school, deep-passing attack requires the right personnel. Roethlisberger is better served getting the ball to his talented supporting cast as quickly as possible.

That cast starts with Antonio Brown, who plays much larger than his 5' 10", 180-pound frame. Because of his elite leaping ability and route running he was the best receiver in football last season, with more catches (129) and yards (1,698) than anyone else. It doesn't hurt that he has two ascending talents alongside him in Wheaton and Bryant (who's expected to miss the first four games for a drug suspension), or that third-round pick Sammie Coates (Auburn) should be ready to assist right away.

In the backfield Bell is the NFL's best dual-threat player, having just put up 1,361 yards rushing and 83 receptions in year two. An All-Pro in 2014, he possesses a rare blend of agility, quickness, power and vision. You could argue that only his hyperextended knee injury in Week 17 prevented the Steelers from advancing past the Ravens in the playoffs. The team signed former Panthers veteran DeAngelo Williams to make sure the O doesn't end up shorthanded again, particularly during Bell's two-game ban (failed drug test) to start the season.

As for health and the line, the Steelers finally got some luck in 2014, staying relatively injury-free in the trenches. That luck has already run out in '15, however, as center Maurkice Pouncey broke his left fibula in the preseason and is expected to miss significant time. Around him, right guard David DeCastro and right tackle Marcus Gilbert are in the upper echelon of players at their positions. Kelvin Beachum, a godsend as a '12 seventh-round pick, is very capable at left tackle. In '13, Pittsburgh played nine different linemen and that group allowed Roethlisberger to be knocked down 61 times. Last season, with just five linemen taking on the majority of the snaps, he was knocked down just 34 times.

The Steelers must improve in the red zone; last season they ranked 19th with a TD rate of 51.7%. Haley's off-season study found his team cost itself roughly 30 total points in the red area (which he views from the 35-yard line, not the standard 20). "We can't give points away," Haley says. "We obviously want to score touchdowns. But what kept us from being *really* good was the fact that we had too many possessions where we got zero points, whether it was an ill-timed sack that took us out of field goal range or a couple turnovers down there."

Playing with a defense that will be without legendary coordinator Dick LeBeau (who landed in Tennessee), and minus stars like retired safety Troy Polamalu, the Steelers will need every point they can get. —G.B.

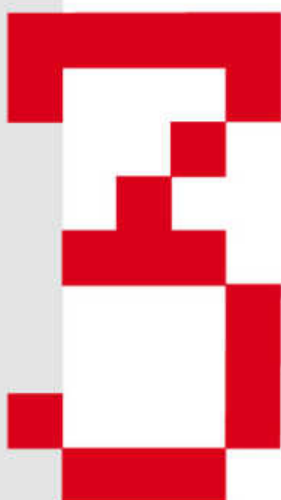




AFC
NORTH

2014
Record:
10-5-1

Cincinnati Bengals



THE MONEY YEAR

Here we go. Again. Maybe for the final time.

For four seasons the Bengals have been the NFL's ultimate tease. They are talented in so many areas and consistent enough to lock up postseason berths, but not good enough, for whatever reason—*cough*, quarterback—to win a single playoff game in that span.

This year looks to be much of the same. The talent is there for a Super Bowl run. But it's the same players and coach that have repeatedly left fans flummoxed. A precipitous drop is more likely.

Is there anything that could forestall SI's predicted regression for this team? Perhaps urgency. Many key players, including a whopping 12 starters, will be unrestricted free agents at year's end, and that might not be a bad thing. It means those players have much to play for: themselves as a group for the final time, and as individuals to improve their free-agent prospects.

The Bengals have entire units involved in this po-

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SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
SEPTEMBER 7, 2015

2015 SCHEDULE

SI'S PREDICTION: 6-10

SEPT. 13



SEPT. 20



SEPT. 27



OCT. 4



OCT. 11



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† When combined with a proper exercise and nutrition program. Please consult with your physician before using Training Mask.

tential exodus, starting with the top three receivers: A.J. Green, Mohamed Sanu and Marvin Jones. Both starting tackles, Andrew Whitworth and Andre Smith, could walk. The secondary stands to lose the four players who were on the field for the most snaps last season: safeties George Iloka and Reggie Nelson, and cornerbacks Leon Hall and Adam Jones.

Some of the paydays they find will certainly be elsewhere, as the Bengals have players poised to fill those spots. In the draft Cincy doubled up on highly rated tackles, taking Texas A&M's Cedric Ogbuehi (coming back from right-knee surgery) in the first round and Oregon's Jake Fisher in the second. At receiver the Bengals have Brandon Tate and Denarius Moore, who underachieved in Oakland after a promising start to his career. At cornerback Dre Kirkpatrick and Darqueze Dennard are recent

high draft picks who are ready to take the next step. And former third-round pick Shawn Williams could grab a starting spot at safety this season if Iloka or Nelson slips up.

Much, of course, will depend on how well Andy Dalton directs a talented offense in the biggest games, but the defense must reestablish itself as the backbone of this team. That unit has broken down too often in key spots, and last year it regressed seriously; in 2013 it was third in yards allowed and fifth in points, but in '14 it finished 22nd and 12th in those categories. The drop coincided with assistant Paul Guenther's taking over for former coordinator Mike Zimmer, who left to coach the Vikings.

The Bengals need defensive tackle Geno Atkins and linebacker Vontaze Burfict to return to form. Atkins was the best three-technique lineman (if not all-around defender) in the NFL before an ACL injury ended his 2013 campaign.

In the 25 games before the injury Atkins had 18½ sacks. Last season he had just three in 16 games. And his decline was a big reason for the Bengals' league-worst 20 sacks. (The other was the team's failure to adequately replace end Michael Johnson, who signed with Tampa Bay but is now back in Cincinnati.) The good news is that so far in training camp Atkins is far from "just a guy," which is what Guenther called him last season.

Then there's Burfict, who was the team's leading tackler in 2012 and '13 but had concussion issues and then a left-knee injury which ended his season in Week 5. His playmaking was sorely missed. Burfict is still working his way back, but the Bengals drafted a potential sub in the third round in P.J. Dawson (TCU) and also signed longtime Packers middle linebacker A.J. Hawk, who is sound in his assignments but hasn't been an impact player for some time. Burfict, whose off-field issues raised red flags coming out of college, has developed into an exemplary leader on the field; his return is essential to a postseason breakthrough.

The secondary, until free agency breaks it up, can match the best in the league with talent and depth. Cornerbacks Hall, Kirkpatrick, Dennard and Jones can all play man-to-man effectively. Nelson and Iloka carried the D in 2014, mostly because the front seven left so much for the safeties to clean up. That can't happen again.

This could be the final run of one of the most frustrating teams in recent NFL history, and one that could cost coach Marvin Lewis his job. So talented . . . so little to show for it.

—G.B.

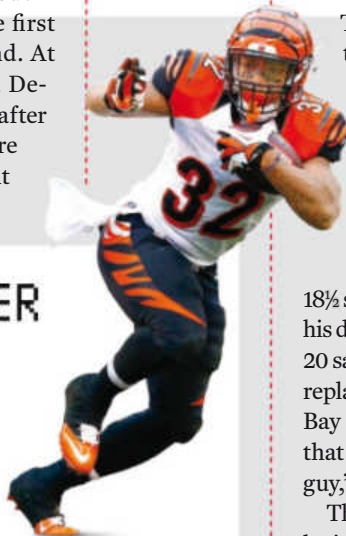
THEMMQB.COM INSIDER

ANDY BENOIT ON THE BENGALS' NEED TO RUN

When you see the loaded offense surrounding Cincinnati's decidedly average quarterback, know that the Bengals haven't been built this way by accident. They fully understand Andy Dalton's strengths (high presnap IQ) and limitations (arm strength and erratic postsnap decision making), and they've constructed their roster accordingly. At wide receiver Dalton has one of the game's best in A.J. Green, a limber, wide-radius target. Green's

acrobatics, though, may have given his quarterback a false sense of security; the 6' 4" receiver has been the intended target on 28 Dalton interceptions since 2011, the most for any duo in the NFL during that span. Granted, some of these picks have been Green's fault, but it's a reminder that a time-tested way to cater to an average quarterback is to support him with a strong backfield—hence Cincinnati's second-round selections of running backs

Jeremy Hill (above) last year and Giovani Bernard the year before. Hill has the power and light feet to be a 1,500-yard downhill bruiser. The 5' 9" Bernard brings to mind Maurice Jones-Drew. These two provide a strong ground game and an electricity on screen passes, and they should be play-caller Hue Jackson's focus in 2015.



OCT. 18



OCT. 25



NOV. 1



NOV. 5



THURSDAY

NOV. 16



MONDAY

NOV. 22



NOV. 29



DEC. 6



DEC. 13



DEC. 20



DEC. 28



MONDAY

JAN. 3



IRAQ
VETERAN

you showed me
not everyone in this
world is against me.
Thank you!!!

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 **Volunteers
of America®**

AFC
NORTH2014
Record:
7-9

Cleveland Browns

4

IT TAKES A STEADY HAND

When Mike Pettine took over as coach of the Browns after the 2013 season, he had a clear vision. Without The Guy at quarterback, or a pick high enough to draft one that he and general manager Ray Farmer liked, they would find a smart veteran, groom younger quarterbacks behind him, and build the most balanced team they could. The defense would be the backbone. On offense the line would be their strength, and they'd be able to run the ball. You need some mudders if you're playing in the AFC North late in the season.

For the most part, Cleveland followed the plan in Pettine's first year, except for the first-round selection of quarterback Johnny Manziel, which appeared to be a forced decision (perhaps by owner Jimmy Haslam). Still, despite a devastating injury to Pro Bowl center Alex Mack in Week 6, the Browns went 7-9, which, even with five straight losses to end the season, wasn't all that bad. This, after all, was only the second time

KEN BLAZER/USA TODAY SPORTS (LEFT); PAUL JASSEN/PA

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2015 SCHEDULE

SI'S PREDICTION: 6-10

SEPT. 13



SEPT. 20



SEPT. 27



OCT. 4



OCT. 11



since 2002 that the Browns had won more than six games in one campaign.

It can't be overstated how much the Browns missed Mack. According to Football Outsiders, at the time of the injury the Browns' offense ranked fourth in total offense, fifth in passing and eighth in rushing. By season's end the unit was 28th, 22nd and 26th.

The uncertainty up front affected the entire offense (which was short on weapons even before receiver Josh Gordon was suspended for 10 games), especially quarterback Brian Hoyer, whose play dropped off, leading to his being benched briefly for an unprepared Manziel and overmatched fellow rookie Connor Shaw.

After the season Cleveland rebooted offensively. Coordinator Kyle Shanahan resigned and the front office replaced him with neophyte John DeFilippo, a former Raiders quarterbacks coach who has never

been a coordinator but who had drawn attention for his work with Derek Carr last year. The Browns also snatched up 36-year-old quarterback Josh McCown, who was released by Tampa Bay after a lost season. This ended the tenure of Hoyer, who signed with Houston. Manziel, meanwhile, checked himself into rehab, and the former life of the party says he has emerged as a new man. "Off the field for me right now is really simple," Manziel says. "It's football right now, and it'll be that way throughout the rest of the season. Now it's a really simple schedule: Just come to work every day, be in the building, do what I'm supposed to do, and everything else will take care of itself."

It appears that the arrival of McCown—like Manziel a native of East Texas—has helped the former Heisman Trophy winner. "We have a lot of that Texas bond in common," Manziel says. "More than anything, Josh has been through this a lot. He is a savvy vet. A guy that I really like having around. [We] couldn't get along better."

The Manziel circus has left town. A big reason is that Pettine eliminated the specter of a quarterback controversy by making it very clear that McCown is the starter, and it will take a lot to wrest the job from the 12-year veteran. "[McCown] is a guy that takes care of his job," says receiver Brian Hartline. "He makes the guys around him better. Anytime you do that as a quarterback, you're always in a good position."

McCown will have more talent around him than his predecessor. Mack is back, and first-round pick Cameron Erving, a versatile O-lineman out of Florida State, gives the line needed depth and the flexibility to put the best five players on the field. Hartline, who is a solid possession receiver, was signed from the Dolphins. Dwayne Bowe, the former Chief, may not be able to get past man coverage like he once did, but at 6' 2" and 222 pounds, the receiver is still a size mismatch. Travis Benjamin is fully recovered from his November 2013 knee surgery and seems to have developed a rapport with McCown. Cleveland would love even more from speedy slot receiver Andrew Hawkins, who had 63 receptions after coming over from Cincinnati last season.

The Browns face a stout schedule this season, and their division rivals are improved as well, so it will be a tougher road for Pettine in his second year. But his plan appears to be on track, even if the first season didn't quite follow the script.

—G.B.



THEMMQB.COM INSIDER

ANDY BENOIT ON THE BROWNS' RISING RUN DEFENSE

Cleveland's defense ranked dead last against the run in 2014, despite not giving up a single rush over 38 yards. Opponents simply moved the ball steadily against them, five yards at a time. Some have chalked this up to players needing time to adjust to new coach Mike Pettine's scheme. Perhaps—except Pettine's scheme is not complicated in its run-stopping principles. It focuses less on gap responsibilities and instead asks defensive linemen to be physically

destructive so that linebackers can stay clean and be read-and-react ball hunters. It's no surprise the Browns spent their first-round pick on Washington nosetackle Danny Shelton (*above*). He's drawn comparisons to Vince Wilfork, who has been one of the game's preeminent two-gap forces. Shelton figures to replace the injury-prone Phil Taylor, a 335-pound upright player with good initial movement who could still see time at defensive end. Also at end,

Cleveland signed Dolphins veteran Randy Starks, a still-viable phone booth fighter, and drafted Xavier Cooper (Washington State) in the third round. Those two will share time with incumbents Desmond Bryant (a puncher) and Billy Winn (a quick-hands chopper). Overall, these upgrades should invigorate the Browns' run defense.

OCT. 18	OCT. 25	NOV. 1	NOV. 5	NOV. 15	NOV. 22	NOV. 30	DEC. 6	DEC. 13	DEC. 20	DEC. 27	JAN. 3
DEN L	STL L	ARI W	CIN L	PIT L	BYE	BAL L	CIN W	SF L	SEA L	KC L	PIT W
			THURSDAY			MONDAY					


AFC
SOUTH

 2014
 Record:
11-5

Indianapolis Colts

1

NEED MORE THAN LUCK

The Colts, who last season ranked third in yards gained and sixth in points scored, used their free-agent money to sign aging former superstars Andre Johnson (Texans) and Frank Gore (49ers), and their first-round pick on speedy receiver Phillip Dorsett (Miami). The Colts are building a monster, all right ... a monster fantasy football team.

How those players are going to help Indianapolis topple the Super Bowl champion Patriots, a team that has beaten the Colts three times in the past two seasons (twice in the playoffs) by a combined score of 130-49, is anyone's guess. Yet all you hear out of Indianapolis is that the pressure to win is on coach Chuck Pagano, who has yet to have his expiring contract extended. Not a word is said about the architect of the team, general manager Ryan Grigson, and his future status.

Make no mistake: If the Colts don't play better on the field this season—and everyone in Indianapolis, includ-

JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES (LEFT); CHRISTOPHER SZAGOL/ACSM

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 SEPTEMBER 7, 2013

2013 SCHEDULE
SI'S PREDICTION: 11-5

SEPT. 13



SEPT. 21



SEPT. 27



OCT. 4



OCT. 8



■ HOME □ AWAY

MONDAY

THURSDAY

ing owner Jim Irsay, is expecting this team to make the Super Bowl—it will be because of Grigson's failings.

You don't need a degree in pigskin to know the Colts have been consistently weak on the offensive and defensive lines. No quarterback in football was hit more than Luck in 2014. Indianapolis averaged 3.9 yards per rushing attempt, 24th in the league. On defense the Colts allowed 4.3 yards per attempt, which ranked 22nd in the league. Only the Cardinals and the Bengals had worse pass rushes, according to Pro Football Focus.

The Colts signed only Kendall Langford, a cap casualty of the Rams, on the defensive line and waited until the third round (where instant contributors are few and far between) to draft some help. They didn't sign anyone on the offensive line, hoping a good left tackle (Anthony Castonzo) and a full year



THEMMQB.COM INSIDER

ANDY BENOIT ON THE COLTS' WEIRD DRAFT

When GM Ryan Grigson drafted Miami's Phillip Dorsett at No. 29, America said, *Wait, what?* Reportedly, so did a few Colts players. Sure, with his dazzling speed and playmaking prowess, Dorsett is a worthy first-rounder. If afforded clean access off the line, he can take the top off a defense. But the 2014 Colts already had the NFL's top-rated passing game. Their two best wideouts—25-year-old T.Y. Hilton and 22-year-old Donte Moncrief—still have their peaks ahead

of them, and longtime Texan Andre Johnson (*above*) was signed as a badly needed possession receiver. Given the Colts' mediocre pool of defensive talent—particularly up front and in the pass rush—Grigson's selection of Dorsett looks a lot like a father of four buying a second sports car. But you can follow the GM's logic: With Andrew Luck, who has no discernible weaknesses, on track to become an all-time great, you can't go wrong by giving him

more weapons. Defensive coordinators gulp when considering the electricity Luck has around him now—and he plays for a coordinator, Pep Hamilton, who has been very shrewd about leveraging receivers' speed through downfield route combinations. The Colts now have the scariest passing game in football.

from center Khaled Holmes can improve the unit. Moving second-year tackle Jack Mewhort outside from guard should be an upgrade from Gosder Cherilus, who was released. Those three will have to be good, because left guard Lance Louis and right guard Todd Herremans have had issues in their previous stops.

The Colts need a few old dogs to give them some bite at outside linebacker as Robert Mathis, a premier edge rusher until he tore his left Achilles last year, tries to come back from that potentially devastating injury at age 34. Trent Cole, 32, was an underrated player for the Eagles and should still have some good football in front of him. Former first-round pick Bjoern Werner has been a bust so far for Grigson; Erik Walden, who was given big money coming from the Packers, isn't an every-down player.

The Colts are set at inside linebacker and in the secondary. D'Qwell Jackson and Jerrell Freeman are as good against the pass as they are against the run inside, if the line does its job. Vontae Davis is a difference-maker at cornerback, and has solid help from Greg Toler and Darius Butler. Mike Adams is looking to build off a standout season, and free agent Dwight Lowery is an upgrade at the other safety spot.

But the question remains, Have the Colts done enough on either line to become the contenders they believe themselves to be? Since quarterback Andrew Luck was drafted in 2012, they've taken an incremental step each postseason: 0–1, 1–1 and then 2–1, with a loss in last year's AFC championship game. A pessimist would say the Colts had great fortune in all of those victories: The Chiefs lost a 38–10 lead in the third quarter; the Andy Dalton–led Bengals were the walking wounded; Indianapolis struggled to put away a Broncos team that was led by an obviously hampered Peyton Manning, who had the eighth-worst yards per attempt (4.59) in his career.

The AFC is wide open this season. The Patriots are still the team to beat, but they should be weaker on defense without corners Darrelle Revis and Brandon Browner, which plays to the Colts' aerial attack. The Steelers might have a better offense, but even the Colts' defense has the edge. Baltimore's strength is in its lines but is a little weak on the outer edges. Denver has a well-rounded team, but can Peyton Manning play as well in January as he does in September at age 39?

Maybe the Colts are right about themselves, maybe they are Super Bowl contenders. If they aren't, then the blame needs to lie with the front office, not the coaching staff.

—G.B.

OCT. 18	OCT. 25	NOV. 2	NOV. 8	NOV. 15	NOV. 22	NOV. 29	DEC. 6	DEC. 13	DEC. 20	DEC. 27	JAN. 3
NE 	NO 	CAR 	DEN 	BYE 	ATL 	TB 	PIT 	JAX 	HOU 	MIA 	TEN 
				MONDAY							



QB Brian Hoyer

AFC
SOUTH

2014
Record:
9-7

Houston Texans



WELL-ARMED...ON DEFENSE

The Texans want your respect. Coach Bill O'Brien ranted, in colorful language, about the lack of national interest in his team on HBO's *Hard Knocks*. "Let's be honest," he told his assistants, "nobody talks about the Houston Texans because nobody thinks we're gonna win. . . . Enough is enough."

Walking the halls of NRG Stadium, you can't miss the collective chip on the shoulder of a team that last year was one win away from making the playoffs despite myriad quarterback injuries in O'Brien's first season.

Not that anyone noticed.

All the Texans hear is this and that about the Colts and their quarterback, Andrew Luck, leaving a visitor to Houston with the distinct impression that this squad is sick of all the talk about the purported Super Bowl contenders. Good thing for a team looking to knock off Indy and win the AFC South: The rivals play twice every season.

MATTHEW EMMONS/USA TODAY SPORTS (LEFT); KEN MURRAY/CON SPORTSWIRE

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2015 SCHEDULE

SI'S PREDICTION: 11-5

SEPT. 13



SEPT. 20



SEPT. 27



OCT. 4



OCT. 8



■ HOME □ AWAY

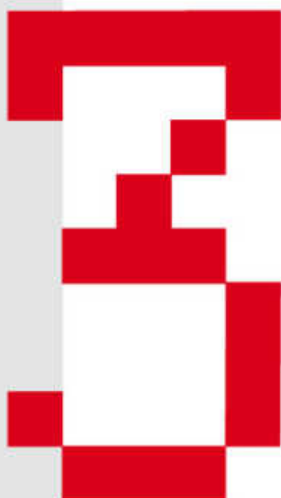
THURSDAY



AFC
SOUTH

2014
Record:
2-14

Tennessee Titans



MEETING OF THE MINDS

When you finish 2-14, as the Titans did in Ken Whisenhunt's first year as their coach, it doesn't take much to divine that change is coming. This off-season Tennessee did make meaningful moves, both schematically and with its personnel. The most obvious change was the drafting of Heisman-winning quarterback Marcus Mariota (Oregon, with the No. 2 pick), who will continue to draw attention throughout a rookie season that will inevitably include wild ups and downs. The next most important change was the hiring of longtime Steelers defensive guru Dick LeBeau, 77. He will have the title of assistant head coach/defense and work with coordinator Ray Horton.

Mediocrity would be a major upgrade for the Titans' defense, which was poor across the board. According to Football Outsiders' formulas, Tennessee's defense ranked in the NFL's bottom third in total defense as well as in such categories as passing,

DON MCPHEAK/USA TODAY SPORTS (LEFT); JOHN DAVID MERCER/USA TODAY SPORTS

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SEPTEMBER 7, 2015

2015 SCHEDULE

SI'S PREDICTION: 3-13

SEPT. 13



SEPT. 20



SEPT. 27



OCT. 4



OCT. 11



rushing, first down, second down, second half, red zone and “late and close” defense.

Horton is a LeBeau disciple who worked with the Hall of Famer for seven seasons in Pittsburgh as a defensive backs coach. But Horton, now in his second season in Tennessee, has developed his own version of the 3–4 pressure scheme. Horton prefers a one-gap attacking style up front with man coverage behind it while LeBeau, still old school, favors a read-and-react two-gap defense up front with predominantly zone coverage behind it. They have been mixing and matching in training camp, and the hope is that these two keen minds can find a blend that works well with their talent.

They do have talent to work with. The Titans



THEMMQB.COM INSIDER

ANDY BENOIT ON THE TITANS' COACH-QB FIT

When Ken Whisenhunt has a drop-back quarterback who can step up in a collapsing pocket and make tight throws, he's prospered. Think Kurt Warner (2007–09 in Arizona); Philip Rivers ('13 in San Diego, where Whisenhunt was offensive coordinator); and a young Ben Roethlisberger (in '04–06 when he was the OC in Pittsburgh). When Whisenhunt *hasn't* had a strong pocket QB (Jake Locker last year, for one),

his teams have struggled. This season we don't know if he has this type of QB or not; Marcus Mariota (*above*) was rarely asked to play this way at Oregon. But scroll through history and try to find a mobile QB from a college spread system who cultivated strong, steady pocket abilities after reaching the NFL. (You can't.) Most likely, Whisenhunt will have to adjust his scheme, as he did last year with Locker. Mariota will be more accurate than Locker, but

that's about all we can assume. How committed will Whisenhunt be to employing zone-read concepts and moving pockets, as the Seahawks do for Russell Wilson? Wilson also benefits from playing with Marshawn Lynch and a top defense. Mariota inherits a team with holes all over. It is far from an ideal environment to step into.

possess one of the NFL's best penetrating tackles in Jurrell Casey, and Horton has pledged not to mess with Casey's success, as his quickness and brute strength make him a handful. Tennessee also likes nosetackle Sammie Hill. (Those outside the organization, however, question whether he's bullish enough to lock down the middle.) The Titans better be right in staying with Hill, because there's no more important position in the 3–4 than nose. Re-signing Derrick Morgan was big. Last year he successfully made the transition from end in the 4–3 to 3–4 outside linebacker and looked like a natural fit there with his 6' 3", 261-pound frame.

Tennessee's problem last season was that when offenses doubled Casey on the inside and sent an extra blocker at Morgan, the defense became easy to pick apart. The Titans addressed that weakness by signing former Redskins outside linebacker Brian Orakpo, who had 38½ sacks in the four seasons in which he played at least 15 games. If Orakpo can stay on the field (two of his past three seasons have ended with him on injured reserve), then Tennessee will present matchup problems. “Orakpo helps us all get better,” says Whisenhunt.

With the front seven—which also includes underrated inside linebackers Zach Brown and Avery Williamson—thus fortified, the pressure falls on the secondary. Injuries kept their No. 1 and No. 3 cornerbacks, Jason McCourty and Bliidi Wreh-Wilson, on the sidelines in training camp, leaving unanswered the question of how those two will mesh with their second-best corner, free-agent signee Perrish Cox. The Titans also signed Da'Norris Searcy away from the Bills to play strong safety. Searcy made some highlight-reel plays in Buffalo, and though he was only a starter there for one season, he flashed the ability to be a strong presence in the middle.

On offense the Titans have provided Mariota with plenty of new toys to play with. They signed receivers Harry Douglas (Atlanta) and Hakeem Nicks (Indianapolis) and drafted Dorion Green-Beckham (Missouri) in the second round to complement Kendall Wright and Justin Hunter. Veteran tight end Anthony Fasano, signed from the Chiefs, will be a useful asset for the rookie quarterback both as a blocker and receiver.

But a young and evolving offense will be inconsistent. That's why it's essential for the defensive brain trust of LeBeau and Horton to meld the old with the new. Failure there is not an option.

—G.B.

OCT. 18

OCT. 25

NOV. 1

NOV. 8

NOV. 15

NOV. 19

NOV. 29

DEC. 6

DEC. 13

DEC. 20

DEC. 27

JAN. 3



THURSDAY


AFC
SOUTH

 2014
 Record:
3-13

Jacksonville Jaguars

4

TIME TO STEP IT UP

As Mike Tyson once said, "Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth." The Jaguars have gone 7-25 in coach Gus Bradley's first two seasons, with a point differential of minus-202 in 2013 and minus-163 in '14. Consider Jacksonville hit squarely on the chin.

Last season Bradley and GM Dave Caldwell had planned to sit rookie QB Blake Bortles for the entire season, and that strategy lasted all of three games. Bortles, after showing promise in his first few starts, unsurprisingly regressed behind a terrible offensive line and with a lack of receiving targets. After an off-season reboot in which Bortles tinkered with his mechanics again, there's optimism that the young quarterback is making progress. While he appears much improved, he also looked good in the preseason last year.

It would help both him and the team if Bradley, who made his name as the Seahawks' defensive coordinator, could elevate the Jaguars' D to mediocrity at the

BILL FRANKS FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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2015 SCHEDULE
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SEPT. 13



SEPT. 20



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OCT. 4



OCT. 11



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Tito

★★★★

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Wall Street Journal

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"Smooth, I mean
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CNN

Certified



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Handcrafted to be savored responsibly.



very least. After finishing 28th and 27th in points and yards allowed in 2013, the Jaguars inched up to 26th in both last season. Analytics—the kind being viewed by the Jaguars’ front office—suggest this team is a little more advanced; according to Football Outsiders, Jacksonville’s defense ranked 20th in total D, rushing, on first and second downs, and in the first half. (It was also an impressive fifth in the red zone.)

The lack of success wasn’t for lack of effort. Flip on the film of any Jaguars game and you’d see players flying all over the field. The problem, of course, was a lack of talent, which was made worse by injuries, most notably to middle linebacker Paul Posluszny, who suffered a torn pectoral in Week 7.

The forecast for 2015 doesn’t look much better. It was a huge blow when end Dante Fowler, the third pick in the draft out of Florida, tore his left ACL in the

first day of minicamp. Outstanding defensive tackle Sen’Derrick Marks, who tore an ACL in the final game of ’14, could be back by the season opener, but if his recovery mirrors that of Cincinnati’s Geno Atkins, a similar player who had the same injury, the tackle won’t regain his explosiveness until next season. While Jared Odrick, signed from the Dolphins, should help against the run, he’s not a great pass rusher, and that is where the Jaguars really need the help.

A big season from former Seahawks end Chris Clemmons would be most welcome. He had eight sacks and four forced fumbles in 2014, his first year in Jacksonville. But Clemmons missed much of training camp with an undisclosed personal issue. Andre Branch, who has been underwhelming to this point in his career, has been working at Clemmons’s spot. But the Jaguars have two young pass rushers to keep an eye on: fourth-year man Ryan Davis, who had 6½ sacks as a reserve last year, and undrafted rookie Nordly Capi (Akron).

The importance of having Posluszny back healthy can’t be overstated. There’s no depth behind him, and as an instinctive middle linebacker who is a great communicator, the Jaguars need him between outside linebackers Telvin Smith (an impressive fifth-round pick last season), and former 49er Dan Skuta. Smith may be the defense’s top playmaker if Marks isn’t back to his former form.

The Jaguars feel very good about their cornerbacks, and they should because they have a deep group. Davon House was signed from the Packers to complement Aaron Colvin and Demetrius McCray. (House and Colvin are likely starters, with McCray coming on in nickel packages.) House was a role player behind veterans in Green Bay, but he’s a terrific athlete. Colvin, last year’s fourth-round pick, showed the rare ability to play outside and in the slot, and he’s definitely on the rise.

At safety there’s a chance Jacksonville could be without Johnathan Cyprien (finger) to start the season, which would be a blow because they are thin at the position—so thin that former Patriot and Colt Sergio Brown could be the starter at free. He’s a decent special teams player, but Brown has yet to show the instincts needed to be an every-down starter. If he doesn’t work out, the Jaguars may have to turn to fourth-round pick James Sample (Louisville).

The Jags have some new weapons for Bortles. Some promising top-line talent. But marked improvement? It remains an elusive goal. This very well could be the last shot for Caldwell and Bradley.

—G.B.

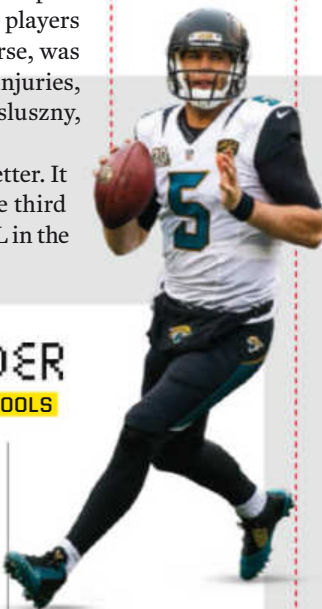
THEMMQB.COM INSIDER

ANDY BENOIT ON THE JAGUARS’ MISPLACED TOOLS

The jury is in early deliberation on Blake Bortles (*above*), the third pick of the 2014 draft. Yes, his rookie numbers were poor, most notably these: 11 TDs, 17 interceptions. It could have been worse, given how often he misread coverages, which will happen to rookies with no help around them. But Bortles also shows signs of a bright future. He moves well enough to warrant regular read-option calls and rollout passes. With his size and ability to string

balls through tight windows, he has the makeup to be sturdy in the pocket. But at this stage he needs the right supporting cast. Bortles has a slow, maybe even methodical, delivery, which limits what he can do in a spread game. He is more suited to a traditional drop-back attack, which requires a stable ground game and trustworthy pass protection—two things the Jags have lacked. On this note, it’s a little puzzling that GM Dave Caldwell spent ’14 second-round

picks on receivers Allen Robinson and especially Marqise Lee. Both are worthy talents but better suited for a spread because their games are based on initial quickness and athleticism. You could argue the same about tight end Julius Thomas. Bortles has the tools, but one questions whether the Jags are putting him in the right box.



OCT. 18



OCT. 25



NOV. 1



NOV. 8



NOV. 15



NOV. 19



NOV. 29



DEC. 6



DEC. 13



DEC. 20



DEC. 27



JAN. 3



IN LONDON

THURSDAY

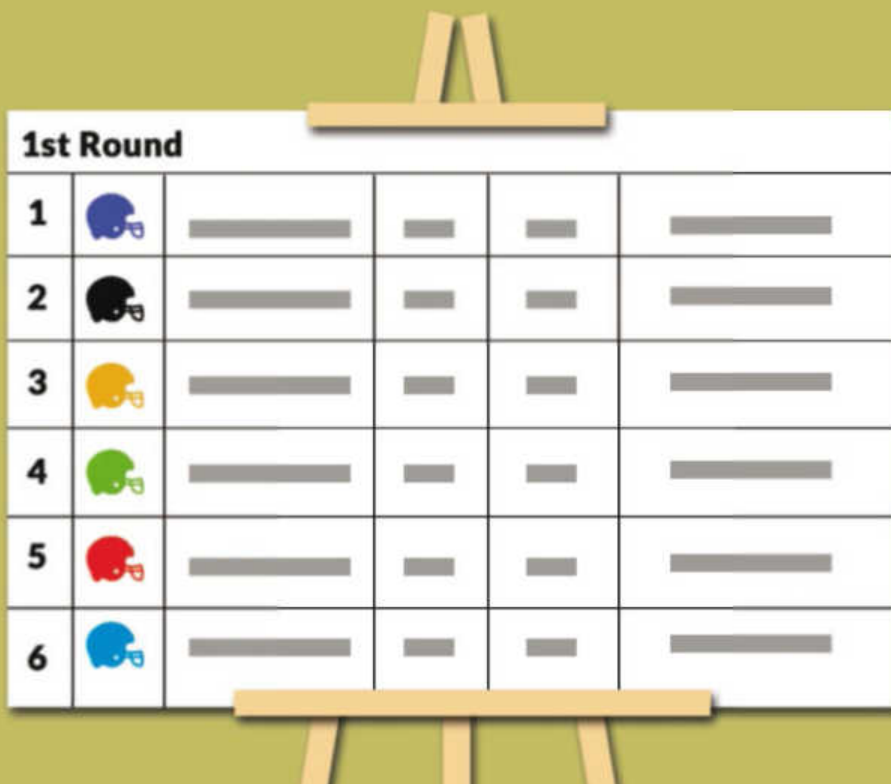
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The image shows a wooden easel holding a draft board for the 1st Round of the NFL Draft. The board is a table with 6 rows and 5 columns. The first column contains the round number (1-6), and the second column contains a colored football helmet icon. The remaining four columns are empty, representing the draft picks for each team.

1st Round				
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				

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RB C.J. Anderson

AFC
WEST

2014
Record:
12-4

Denver Broncos



A RUNNING ARGUMENT

Denver's championship aspirations, as has been the case in each of the past three seasons, boil down to one sentence: As goes Peyton Manning, so go the Broncos. Five months after the future Hall of Famer confirmed he'd return for an 18th season, Denver is hoping not only that its quarterback is healthy but also that he'll thrive in new coach Gary Kubiak's zone-blocking-based scheme. The goal will be to save Manning's arm and take some pressure off the 39-year-old, who labored through a torn right quadriceps late in 2014. In previous seasons Manning has been leery of embracing any kind of reduced role or allowing backup Brock Osweiler to take more than a handful of in-game snaps, but in '15 that will change, for better or for worse.

Offensively, while the Broncos were able to retain Pro Bowl receiver Demaryius Thomas, signing him to a long-term deal in July, they'll also be looking for new and young players to step up in a variety of roles.

SIMON BRUTY FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (LEFT); DAVID E. KLUTHO FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
SEPTEMBER 7, 2015

2015 SCHEDULE

SI'S PREDICTION: 13-3

SEPT. 13



SEPT. 17



SEPT. 27



OCT. 4



OCT. 11



THURSDAY

■ HOME □ AWAY

Kubiak & Co. will turn to second-year receiver Cody Latimer and veteran tight end Owen Daniels, among others, to fill the void created by the departures of Wes Welker and Julius Thomas. For Latimer, that will be less difficult—Welker was a nonfactor for much of last season, and the Broncos have faith in the young receiver out of Indiana, despite his two-catch season in 2014. The acquisition of Daniels, however, won't fully compensate for the free-agency loss of Julius Thomas, who at 6' 5" was able to create mismatches nearly everywhere he lined up.

The Broncos' O-line is where most of the off-season attrition occurred: The team traded center Manny Ramirez to Detroit to move up in the draft and select Missouri defensive end Shane Ray, and it lost left guard Orlando Franklin in free agency. The most



THEMMQB.COM INSIDER

ANDY BENOIT ON THE BRONCOS' DANGEROUS D

For the first time Peyton Manning is quarterbacking a team that will count heavily on its defense. Fortunately, that D has the playmakers for the challenge, although there are questions up the middle. Third-year player Sylvester Williams has a lot to prove at nosetackle; inside linebacking depth is a concern behind Brandon Marshall and Danny Trevathan; and free safety is in flux. But assuming those weaknesses can be minimized, the Broncos, when they

can put opponents into obvious passing situations, will be dangerous. New coordinator Wade Phillips has three high-quality man-to-man corners in Aqib Talib, Chris Harris Jr. and Bradley Roby. Harris and Roby both can play inside or outside, creating matchup flexibility. Tight man coverage means more freedom for the safeties, including thumper T.J. Ward (*above*). It also opens up more possibilities for pressure packages. Headlining these packages are a

pair of proven pass rushers in Von Miller and DeMarcus Ware, plus first-round rookie Shane Ray. The high-ceilinged Ray can be a third rusher in amoeba fronts or a rotational piece behind the 33-year-old Ware. These are the elements for creating sacks and forcing turnovers—which the Broncos must do to support a downgraded offense.

damaging exit from the line, however, was that of All-Pro left tackle Ryan Clady, who suffered a torn left ACL during organized team activities in May and is out for the season. On Aug. 25, Denver made a move to shore up the shaky unit, signing two-time Pro Bowl guard Evan Mathis, who had been released from the Eagles in a cost-cutting move. Still, come September, the team will count on young players, including second-round pick Ty Sambrailo (Colorado State), who is projected to start at left tackle, and Matt Paradis, a sixth-rounder from '14 who's played only 33 NFL snaps, at center.

Toward the end of 2014, when Manning was playing injured, former offensive coordinator Adam Gase implemented a more balanced offense, relying on C.J. Anderson to boost the running game. That expanded role for Anderson and the team's other backs will continue into '15, and the return of a healthy Montee Ball could figure big into the team's plans. "Late in my career, that was my best friend, the running game," says Broncos executive vice president John Elway. "I think that running game will be Peyton's best friend also. Obviously it's going to be a little bit of an adjustment. But [in Manning and Kubiak], you've got two smart, bright offensive football minds that are competitive and want to win. There was never, ever a thought in my mind that this was not going to work."

Defensively, the Broncos remained quiet in the off-season, which is no surprise, after swinging big in free agency a year ago and putting together a group that ranked third in the NFL. The team retains its nucleus of cornerbacks Chris Harris and Aqib Talib, safety T.J. Ward and linebackers DeMarcus Ware and Von Miller. Perhaps the most notable among that group is Miller: Last year, despite returning from an ACL injury just before training camp, Miller had 14 sacks, and he believes he can be even better this year alongside Ware and Shane Ray (Missouri), who could be the steal of the draft after sliding to the 23rd pick because of an April marijuana citation. In addition, the Broncos will get back injured linebackers Brandon Marshall and Danny Trevathan, both of whom figured prominently in the past two years when healthy.

New defensive coordinator Wade Phillips has switched Denver to a 3-4 system, and players have heralded its simplicity. The Broncos could easily finish with a top five defense again, barring injuries or a massive decline from the 33-year-old Ware. For once Denver's questions lie on offense, but the talent is there for one more division championship before the *real* questions about the future set in. —Joan Niesen


AFC
WEST

 2014
 Record:
9-7

Kansas City Chiefs



PICKING UP THE PIECES

When you play in a division as strong as the AFC West, you need a lot to go right in order to succeed. Unfortunately for the Chiefs, their luck ran out following an 11-5 mark in Andy Reid's first season as coach, in 2013. Last year Kansas City was one of four AFC teams (along with their West brethren, San Diego) to finish 9-7 and still miss the playoffs. The Chiefs lost both star inside linebacker Derrick Johnson and defensive lineman Mike Devito in Week 1, and after missing most of the first two months with an ankle injury, versatile playmaking strong safety Eric Berry learned that he had Hodgkins' lymphoma. With injuries mounting on the offensive side as well, attrition most likely prevented K.C. from making a second straight postseason appearance.

To challenge the Broncos for the division crown, the Chiefs must again navigate a minefield of challenges on the defensive side of the ball. The offense should be improved with the addition, finally, of some viable

ED ZUBER/AP (LEFT); JAY BIGGERSTAFF/TUSPAP

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2015 SCHEDULE
SI'S PREDICTION: 9-7

SEPT. 13



SEPT. 17



THURSDAY

SEPT. 28



MONDAY

OCT. 4



OCT. 11



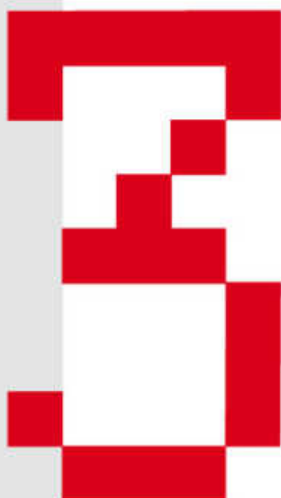
■ HOME □ AWAY



AFC
WEST

2014
Record:
9-7

San Diego Chargers



A HEFTY HEIST

If ever there were a free agent who embodied the axiom “Behind every great fortune is a great crime,” it’s Orlando Franklin. On March 10, the first day of the hot-stove season, the Chargers signed the combo offensive lineman to a five-year, \$35.5 million contract (\$15.5 million guaranteed) that effectively robbed the Broncos, their divisional overlords, of arguably their most promising young blocker. Still, as pro football boardroom dramas go, this business didn’t quite rise to the level of, say, Darrelle Revis’s Jets sequel. Why?

Well, for starters, Franklin hasn’t won a Super Bowl yet—although he did play in the 48th edition, the most significant of his 70 career starts to date. And it was Franklin, not the Chargers, who set this transaction in motion. He not only snubbed Denver, the franchise that plucked him from Miami in the second round of the 2011 draft, but he also brushed off a handful of other teams that were pre-

JIM CAMPOREALE/USA TODAY SPORTS (LEFT); STEPHEN DUNN/GETTY IMAGES

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SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
SEPTEMBER 7, 2015

2015 SCHEDULE

SI'S PREDICTION: 8-8

SEPT. 13



SEPT. 20



SEPT. 27



OCT. 4



OCT. 12



■ HOME □ AWAY

MONDAY

pared to make the 27-year-old an even richer man.

But Franklin had a bigger motive for bolting to SoCal than money or revenge: He wanted to reunite with another Broncos émigré, third-year coach Mike McCoy, the Denver offensive coordinator during Franklin's first two NFL seasons. It shouldn't take Franklin long to absorb the Chargers' line philosophy, which like the Broncos', favors quick-drop protection on passing downs and a zone blocking scheme in the run game. His alloy of size (6' 7", 320 pounds) and quickness is another advantage he has over would-be tacklers. But sometimes—as evidenced by Franklin's 10 penalties, tied for fifth most among league O-linemen—he relies on athleticism more than proper technique.

No surprise, then, that getting Franklin to grab less and push more would become a teaching point of emphasis in training camp. When he's on form (suar-



THEMMQB.COM INSIDER

ANDY BENOIT ON THE CHARGERS' BRILLIANT DESIGNS

If you live outside Southern California and have heard of John Pagano, you probably know him as "Chuck's younger brother." But around the NFL, Pagano is regarded as one of the most difficult defensive coordinators to play against. Few coaches are more likely to call just the right coverage disguise with just the right rotation at just the right time than the 48-year-old. Pagano does a fantastic job at tinkering with his base 3-4 zone's coverages to adjust for his opponent's

tendencies. It helps that Pagano has at his disposal three-time Pro Bowler Eric Weddle (*above*), the most versatile, and maybe most intelligent, safety in the game. Weddle, who does much in the way of presnap disguises, is not often part of Pagano's blitz packages, but those, too, can be aggressive and creative. That said, Pagano's tricks did not lead to enough big plays in '14 for this defense, which was riddled by injuries. Though the unit finished ninth in the NFL in

yardage allowed, the Chargers had just seven interceptions (tied for fourth fewest in the league) and 26 sacks (fourth fewest), both well below San Diego's norms since Pagano became coordinator in '12. He does not have a deep group, but he has young talent at all three levels. If his men stay healthy, expect better results in 2015.

ing his shoulders, flaring out his arms and getting his hands inside his blocking target), there are few more devastating players at left guard or right tackle. He will start the season at left guard, and his inside-out versatility should boost a Chargers line that was all but undone by the sudden injury-related retirements this off-season of Pro Bowl center Nick Hardwick and guard Jeromey Clary. If it hadn't been for the play of King Dunlap, San Diego's tall and rangy left tackle, the line might have fallen to pieces altogether. (Hence the urgency to re-up the seventh-year vet this off-season for four more years at \$28 million.)

Franklin's deceptive quickness, which is most obvious on off-tackle runs, where he cuts through the open field like a combine harvester, adds a dimension to a San Diego ground game that ended the 2014 season in third-to-last place in yards per game (85.4) and in a three-way tie for second-to-last place in touchdowns (six). Even taking into account injuries to running backs Ryan Mathews, Danny Woodhead and Donald Brown, who missed a combined 26 games, these are troubling statistics for a team that prided itself for the better part of the previous 15 years on its ability to control the clock. This is the reason the Chargers addressed their run game in the draft, trading up to No. 15 (from 17, swapping with the 49ers) to select Wisconsin's Melvin Gordon, the reigning FBS rushing leader and presumptive heir to the oft-injured Mathews (now with the Eagles). Franklin looks forward to blocking for Gordon. "Anytime you come into a system and know you'll have the opportunity to run the ball," Franklin says, "it's definitely an exciting time."

On passing plays Franklin is poised to be as great a force. His intuitive understanding of McCoy's playbook takes a load off 12th-year quarterback Philip Rivers, who recently signed a four-year contract extension. He will have enough on his plate trying to assimilate two free-agent targets—Stevie Johnson (late of the Niners) and Jacoby Jones (Ravens)—who figure to see plenty of action while tight end Antonio Gates is serving a four-game suspension for violating the league's PED policy. (Gates, thinking his positive might've come from a supplement or "holistic medicines," didn't challenge the penalty.) But, really, the thing to love about Franklin is his years of experience in practice against a Broncos pass rush that has sacked Rivers 16 times in their last six regular-season meetings. San Diego won just one of those games.

If Franklin can swing the balance between these division rivals, he will truly be a steal. —Andrew Lawrence

OCT. 18	OCT. 25	NOV. 1	NOV. 9	NOV. 15	NOV. 22	NOV. 29	DEC. 6	DEC. 13	DEC. 20	DEC. 24	JAN. 3
GB L	OAK W	BAL L	CHI W	BYE	KC L	JAX W	DEN W	KC L	MIA W	OAK L	DEN L
				MONDAY						THURSDAY	



QB Derek Carr

AFC
WEST

2014
Record:
3-13

Oakland Raiders

4

THIS JUST MIGHT WORK

He played the game, starring at linebacker for 11 seasons, and he won a Super Bowl ring while coaching his old position in Baltimore. He's coordinated defenses in both conferences—in Carolina in 2002 and in Denver for the past three years. And, of course, he ran the show for 8½ years in Jacksonville (from '03 to '11) and held the Broncos together after John Fox had a cardiac episode during the '13 regular season. So it figures that the Raiders would tap Jack Del Rio as their next coach. With the possible exception of Rex Ryan, there wasn't a more qualified person among this off-season's crop of candidates.

Despite those credentials, it remains unclear just how good a head coach Del Rio actually is. Yes, he presided over a critical four-game stretch while subbing for Fox two years ago in Denver, but that outfit was anchored by Peyton Manning, scored points at a record clip and finished the season in the Super Bowl.

ROBERT BECK FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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2015 SCHEDULE

SI'S PREDICTION: 4-12

SEPT. 13



SEPT. 20



SEPT. 27



OCT. 4



OCT. 11





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The good news this time around is that Del Rio doesn't have to sweat the quarterback position. He inherits his best prospect ever in Derek Carr, who in 2014 started all 16 games as a rookie



SI'S ANDY BENOIT ON THE RAIDERS' AMAZING MACK

Outsiders. Down the stretch, Mack was increasingly lined up in a variety of places. New coach Jack Del Rio, who coordinated Denver's defense, used Von Miller in a similar fashion, but don't expect him to do that with Mack. Del Rio believes in straightforward 4-3 zone defense because its simplicity allows players to hone mechanics and to play fast. Denver's wealth of experienced talent allowed Del Rio to play around with Miller. While Oakland's D has talent

with linebacker Sio Moore and promising cornerbacks D.J. Hayden and T.J. Carrie, there's a lack of depth, plus question marks up the middle. Expect Del Rio to keep it basic and deploy Mack in a straight four-man rush. Mack and Oakland's young starters should generate more explosive plays in 2015.

Recent roster upgrades suggest this season will not be the exercise in blooper-making that has defined the Raiders of recent past. Their boldest move this off-season was signing Rodney Hudson, Pro Football Focus's third-highest-rated center, away from the Chiefs, at five years and \$44.5 million. The move adds balance to a line that was strongest on the left side, with veteran Pro Bowl tackle Donald Penn and rookie guard Gabe Jackson, and overall a positive; Oakland last year allowed 28 sacks, tied for sixth fewest in the league. The additions of crafty slot receiver Michael Crabtree (late of the 49ers, and signed to a one-year, \$3.2 million deal) and the No. 4 pick in the draft, Amari Cooper (Alabama), whose camp catches regularly became shareable content online, add much-needed firepower to an offense that led the league in three-and-out drives (71) and finished behind only the Jaguars in scoring, averaging 15.8 points per game. One possible source of in-house help: third-year running back Latavius Murray, who flashed potential when given playing time late last season.

On defense Del Rio tasked Ken Norton Jr., another outstanding linebacker-turned-coach, with coordinating a defense that hasn't been especially good or aggressive in a decade and that last year allowed a league-worst 28.2 points per game. Norton will continue with the team's 4-3 base, at least to start. He has playmakers at two levels—32-year-old defensive end Justin Tuck and second-year linebacker Khalil Mack. The question is whether Norton will have a third in the secondary. Safety Charles Woodson is 38. Cornerback D.J. Hayden, a top pick in 2013, has shutdown ability but has struggled to stay healthy, playing just 18 of a potential 32 games.

If the pieces line up as projected, Del Rio only has to do what he does best—play CEO. After many, many teardowns, Oakland finally has a solid foundation to work with. —A.L.

—A.L.



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RB DeMarco Murray

NFC
EAST

2014
Record:
10-6

Philadelphia Eagles



OFF-SEASON OF CHANGE

The Eagles' down months were nothing if not entertaining. Last January coach Chip Kelly wrested control over football-related decisions from GM Howie Roseman, giving Kelly the freedom to mold his roster. What he did with that freedom was jettison four Pro Bowl players—releasing linebacker Trent Cole and guard Evan Mathis and trading running back LeSean McCoy and quarterback Nick Foles—as well as letting his top receiver from 2014, Jeremy Maclin, walk in free agency.

In two NFL seasons Kelly has gained admirers, spawned imitators and led the Eagles to two 10-6 seasons, but doubters can—and will—point out that he has yet to win a postseason game. Of all his roster moves this off-season (nine starters from 2014 are now with other teams), it's the March quarterback swap with the Rams that will determine whether his Eagles play deeper into January anytime soon.

BILL STETCHEL/USA TODAY SPORTS (LEFT); MITCHELL LEFF/GETTY IMAGES

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SEPTEMBER 7, 2015

2015 SCHEDULE

SI'S PREDICTION: 12-4

■ HOME □ AWAY

SEPT. 14



MONDAY

SEPT. 20



SEPT. 27



OCT. 4



OCT. 11



While the team has been calling it an open quarterback competition, Sam Bradford will be the starter, assuming he is healthy—a big assumption. The No. 1 pick in 2010 has completed a full 16-game schedule only twice, and over the previous two seasons he played a combined seven games after twice suffering ACL tears in his left knee. Even more of a cautionary note: In Bradford's 49 starts his record is 18-30-1 and his completion percentage is 58.6%, which is 32nd in the NFL over that period, below that of Jason Campbell, Ryan Fitzpatrick and Chad Henne. Still, the Chip Kelly Experience should boost those numbers. Last season Kelly's system helped Mark Sanchez—Bradford's likely backup—achieve career highs in almost every statistical category.

The Eagles' receiving core is thin, but it has talent. Last year second-round rookie Jordan Mat-

thews, lining up primarily out of the slot, pulled in 67 receptions and 872 yards. This year he will be paired with 2015 first-rounder Nelson Agholor (USC), who was playing on the outside early in camp, allowing Matthews to stay inside. But, Matthews warned, "We're going to be able to do both. Coach likes versatile receivers."

The passing game will also get a boost from third-year tight end Zach Ertz. The only active ends who had more receiving yards through their first two NFL seasons are Rob Gronkowski, Jimmy Graham, Antonio Gates and Jason Witten. While Ertz was only on the field for half the team's offensive snaps in 2014 because of his inconsistent blocking, he still ranked seventh at his position with nine receptions of 20-plus yards. In the off-season he worked on his blocking with Hudson Houck—the retired offensive line coach of the bruising 1990s Cowboys—and he trained in both boxing and MMA to improve leverage and hand fighting. "I want to be an every-down tight end," Ertz says. "I'm definitely not satisfied."

At running back Kelly replaced McCoy by signing the NFL's leading rusher of 2014, former Cowboy DeMarco Murray. There will be questions, however, about Murray's durability. His 436 carries (regular and postseason) were the seventh most in NFL history. The last two backs to have more carries, Terrell Davis and Jamal Anderson in 1998, didn't make it past their team's fourth game the following season before serious injury befell them. It will help that Murray is splitting carries with former Charger Ryan Mathews, another free-agent signee, and with Darren Sproles. In addition Kelly's program includes a sports-science regimen that is supposed to help prevent injuries—early in camp Kelly held Murray out of drills one day because his hydration level was low. And while Murray is no longer running behind the Cowboys' vaunted offensive line, the Eagles were actually graded as the best run-blocking unit in the league last season by Pro Football Focus.

The defense—oh, the poor Philadelphia defense, which has led the league in time spent on the field in each of Kelly's two seasons—was renovated too. Defensive backs Byron Maxwell and Walter Thurmond were signed to revamp a secondary that allowed 72 plays of 20-plus yards last year, worst in the NFL.

It was just another element of a stunning off-season, one that will either enhance Kelly's status as a savant or move him closer to being the coach who flew too close to the sun.

—Ben Baskin



THEMMQB.COM INSIDER

ANDY BENOIT ON THE EAGLES' PRIZED NEW CORNER

Coach Chip Kelly has little to do with Philadelphia's defense, but he knows that he wants it to be both aggressive and sophisticated. That's why he hired coordinator Billy Davis when he joined the Eagles in 2013. Davis's 3-4 scheme features an array of personnel packages and blitz designs, and to disguise his plans he'll move around any front-seven defender. But such an approach demands consistent man coverage from his outside corners.

Last season left cornerback Bradley Fletcher was beaten repeatedly over the top and became every opposing quarterback's favorite player. With teams attacking that weak spot, Davis turned gun-shy with his play calls down the stretch. The Eagles lost their identity and, with it, three straight games in December. So it was no surprise this off-season when the Eagles shelled out \$22 million guaranteed for Seahawks free agent Byron

Maxwell (above). The fifth-year corner is a strong, long-armed press defender, as is second-round rookie Eric Rowe (Utah). With more size and strength on the perimeter, and with versatile athletes inside—including newly acquired linebacker Kiko Alonso—Philadelphia's D now has the personnel to dictate games.

OCT. 19	OCT. 25	NOV. 1	NOV. 8	NOV. 15	NOV. 22	NOV. 26	DEC. 6	DEC. 13	DEC. 20	DEC. 26	JAN. 3
NYG	CAR	BYE	DAL	MIA	TB	DET	NE	BUF	ARI	WAS	NYG
MONDAY						THURSDAY				SATURDAY	



DE Randy Gregory

NFC
EAST

2014
Record:
12-4

Dallas Cowboys



GETTING DEFENSIVE

True, the Cowboys engaged in a brawl that made national headlines and were outscored in their first two preseason games 40-13. In the second of those defeats, against the 49ers, they ran the ball poorly, yielded four sacks, had a punt blocked and made Jarryd Hayne, a 27-year-old Aussie rugby player, look like the second coming of Gale Sayers.

And still, the defending NFC East champs were enjoying, arguably, a superb training camp. Seriously. Coach Jason Garrett limited quarterback Tony Romo and graybeard tight end Jason Witten to one series against the Niners. All-Pro wideout Dez Bryant did not play a snap. Neither did three offensive line starters. Plenty of teams limit their stars' playing time in August, though few are as overt about it as the Cowboys, who went 0-for-August a year ago, and whose message might as well be: *We don't give a fig about exhibition results, as long as our key players stay healthy.*

KIRBY LEE/USA TODAY SPORTS (LEFT); LOUIS LOPEZ/CSM

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2015 SCHEDULE

SI'S PREDICTION: 11-5

SEPT. 13



SEPT. 20



SEPT. 27



OCT. 4



OCT. 11



By that measure, this preseason was a resounding success . . . right up until Aug. 25. That's when feisty, smothering press cornerback Orlando Scandrick tore the anterior and medial collateral ligaments in his right knee during practice. Scandrick, who was equally comfortable covering receivers outside and in the more cramped confines of the slot, will miss the entire season. First-round pick Byron Jones, a 6-foot, 199-pound rookie out of Connecticut, will need to grow up fast. And this would be an optimal time for Morris Claiborne, the oft-burnt, frequently injured former first-rounder who lost his job to Scandrick last September, to salvage his career.

How this defense copes with the loss of its best defensive back now becomes the second-biggest question hovering over the Cowboys. The first: How will Dallas replace departed free agent DeMarco Murray, last year's NFL rushing champion? Nag-

THEMMQB.COM INSIDER

ANDY BENIOIT ON THE NEW GREAT WALL OF DALLAS

You could argue that the most important element of the Cowboys' dynasty of the mid-1990s was a massive O-line that paved the way for Emmitt Smith and protected Troy Aikman. Twenty years later this team, remarkably, finds itself with a front five that rivals that Great Wall of Dallas. The current group—by far the NFL's best—dominates more through athleticism than through sheer power. Whereas the '90s Cowboys relied on gap-based scheme blocking, with pull blockers

and smashmouth runs, today's group is mostly zone-based, with many of its runs designed to reach the perimeter. Dallas has the perfect personnel for this: Tyron Smith (*above*) is the game's most athletic left tackle; second-year right guard Zack Martin is about as fundamentally sound as they come; and center Travis Frederick is *exactly* as fundamentally sound as they come. Frederick also has great initial quickness, which propagates the line's collective movement. And



things could even get better: Rookie La'el Collins (LSU) was seen by most as a top 20 pick but, due to legal concerns, went undrafted and signed as a free agent. He'll eventually start at left guard or right tackle. With so much talent along the front, it doesn't matter who's running the ball, as long as he hits the hole.

ging, minor injuries to Darren McFadden and Joseph Randle prevented either back from seizing the job. Whether one emerges, or Garrett opts for a committee of ballcarriers, his offense—the league's fifth-highest scoring in 2014, with 29.2 points per game—is going to be very potent yet again. Dallas made its most dramatic off-season improvements on the other side of the ball.

Exhibit A: edge rusher Randy Gregory, the 6' 5", 245-pound rookie out of Nebraska, who was described in one scouting report as being "stronger than expected at the point of attack." That was certainly the experience of Rams offensive tackle Isaiah Battle, whom Gregory body-slammed during team drills in a joint practice on Aug. 18. That stunt sparked a donnybrook, video of which swiftly went viral.

It was one of Gregory's few ill-considered moves since joining the team. Widely viewed as the best pure pass rusher available, he scared teams off by testing positive for marijuana at the combine. Confident that they had the support systems in place to keep him on the straight and narrow, and, as it happened, starved for sacks—Dallas mustered a measly 28 last season, fifth worst in the NFL—the Cowboys snagged Gregory with the 60th pick. Early returns indicate that he could be the steal of the draft.

There was Gregory, lined up against Pro Bowl tackle Joe Staley in the second quarter of that 49ers exhibition. After opening with pure speed to the outside, Gregory feigned an inside move, which got Staley leaning, then blew by him with more speed outside, sacking quarterback Colin Kaepernick for a 14-yard loss. Gregory also drew a pair of holding penalties in the game.

He will be a dangerous complement to 6' 5", 279-pound defensive end Greg Hardy, whom Dallas signed in the off-season, once he serves his four-game suspension for conduct detrimental to the league. Hardy was convicted on charges of assault and communicating threats in July 2014, but the case was later dismissed on appeal when the alleged victim failed to appear in court. To get him on the field with Gregory, DC Rod Marinelli will have the option of moving Hardy inside. At the other end: DeMarcus Lawrence, a second-round pick in '14 out of Boise State who had two sacks for the Cowboys in the playoffs. Joining them in the race to the quarterback will be Lawrence's former college teammate, Tyrone Crawford, one of the NFL's better pass-rushing tackles, and end Jeremy Mincey, who led Dallas in sacks last year with six. Prediction: He won't be the team's sack leader this season. And the guy who is will have a lot more than six. —Austin Murphy

OCT. 18	OCT. 25	NOV. 1	NOV. 8	NOV. 15	NOV. 22	NOV. 26	DEC. 7	DEC. 13	DEC. 19	DEC. 27	JAN. 3
BYE	NYG	SEA	PHI	TB	MIA	CAR	WAS	GB	NYJ	BUF	WAS
						THURSDAY	MONDAY		SATURDAY		



NFC
EAST

2014
Record:
6-10

New York Giants



A REAL FIXER-UPPER

It's early August and the most important member of the 2015 Giants is running around the team's practice field, bouncing from one player to the next, wide-eyed and screaming. His arms gesticulate in some combination of a defensive swim move and the Nae Nae.

"SPAAAAAGS!" a fan bellows from the bleachers.

Defensive coordinator Steve Spagnuolo has been away for a while, but his manic energy is a familiar sight for Giants fans. And the job he is tasked with—rebuilding New York's defense—is one he has previously accomplished.

When Spagnuolo first came to the Giants in 2007, as a coordinator, he inherited a unit that had ranked 24th in points and 25th in yards allowed the previous year. The Giants won a Super Bowl in his first season and had a top five defense the following year. In the six seasons since Spagnuolo left in '09 to become the Rams' head coach (his stint there lasted three

ALEX GOODMAN/GETTY IMAGES (LEFT); SIMON BRUYER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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SEPTEMBER 7, 2015

2015 SCHEDULE

SI'S PREDICTION: 5-11

SEPT. 13



SEPT. 20



SEPT. 24



OCT. 4



OCT. 11



THURSDAY

■ HOME □ AWAY

unsuccessful years), the Giants defense has ranked, on average, 21st in points and 19th in yards.

Transforming the defense again won't be easy. Spagnuolo is known not just for his intensity but for his creative blitzes, and with the state of the Giants' defensive personnel, he will need that creativity. The team's longest-tenured defensive player and biggest star, Jason Pierre-Paul, is still recovering from an off-season fireworks accident that cost him a finger, and his timetable for return is uncertain. This means Spagnuolo will likely open the year without a player who has had a season with double-digit sacks, the first time that can be said about a Giants defense since 1984. He will rely on a rotation of edge pass rushers with modest track records: Robert Ayers (17 career sacks), George Selvie (13), Damontre Moore (5½), Kerry Wynn (1½) and rookie third-rounder Owa-

magbe Odighizuwa (UCLA). Moore, a third-round pick in 2013 who has yet to start a game, is a player that many—including Spagnuolo and coach Tom Coughlin—have pointed to as a potential playmaker.

Behind the front four are more unknowns. Middle linebacker Jon Beason, 30, was limited to appearances in four games last year due to a toe injury. The team's outside 'backers, second-year player Devon Kennard and J.T. Thomas, signed from the Jaguars, have a combined 18 career starts. Kennard—a fifth-round pick in 2014 who showed flashes as a rookie, with 4½ sacks in the team's final five games, will play a role in Spagnuolo's trademark second-level blitzes, while Thomas will be tasked more with coverage.

In the secondary, late camp signee Brandon Meriweather is the only safety who has started an NFL game, which could give second-round rookie Landon Collins (Alabama) the opportunity to live up to his boast that he will be named Rookie of the Year. On paper the unit's strength is its cornerbacks, with veterans Prince Amukamara and Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie. But Amukamara has only played a full 16-game season once (2013), while Rodgers-Cromartie is six years and three teams removed from his lone Pro Bowl appearance.

All that explains why general manager Jerry Reese said to reporters in August that "if you don't score 28 points in this league, it's hard to win."

The Giants' offense may very well be able to do that. Quarterback Eli Manning is coming off the greatest statistical season of his career, with bests in touchdown-to-interception ratio and completion percentage, and says he is even more comfortable in his second year in coordinator Ben McAdoo's West Coast system. Add in the lethal combination of Odell Beckham Jr. and Victor Cruz, seemingly healthy after his season-ending torn patella tendon last October, and skilled pass-catching back Shane Vereen, signed from New England, and the New York's air attack should be near the top of the league.

A troubling note, though, is that not one member of the team's heavily reshuffled starting offensive line—including rookie left tackle Ereck Flowers, the team's first-round pick, out of Miami—played last season at the position he is currently slotted to play. This group is bound to have, at the very least, early struggles. This means the defense will have to do much more than it did last year, and that's why Spagnuolo will be so important for the Giants this season. It's a tough ask for the frenetic 55-year-old, but it's nothing he hasn't done before. —B.B.

THEMMQB.COM INSIDER

ANDY BENJOIT ON THE GIANTS' EXPECTED BREAKOUT

Entering year two under offensive coordinator Ben McAdoo and his Packers-style West Coast spread system, the Giants are expected by many to be the breakout offense of 2015. Eli Manning (*above*) last year adjusted his mechanics and was more often in sync with his receivers, even after losing slot ace Victor Cruz to a season-ending knee injury in October. If Cruz, a shifty, deceptive route-runner, can regain enough of his old form, New York will have

the most feared receiving corps in football. Lining up with Cruz will be an improved—but still erratic—Rueben Randle, a tough one-on-one cover on in-breaking routes. Oh, and there's Odell Beckham Jr., perhaps football's freakiest raw talent. As last season progressed, Beckham was used in an increasing variety of ways. Expect more of that this year. Also, the Giants signed versatile free-agent RB Shane Vereen from New England and

have a budding flex tight end in second-year starter Larry Donnell. With a brainy QB like Manning, McAdoo can align his chess pieces in myriad fashions. This will stress defenses that are already afraid of Beckham's big-play ability and are therefore even more susceptible to the quick-strike throws that this system is really all about.



OCT. 19	OCT. 25	NOV. 1	NOV. 8	NOV. 15	NOV. 22	NOV. 29	DEC. 6	DEC. 14	DEC. 20	DEC. 27	JAN. 3
PHI L	DAL L	NO L	TB W	NE L	BYE	WAS L	NYJ W	MIA L	CAR L	MIN L	PHI L
MONDAY								MONDAY			



DT Terrance Knighton

NFC
EAST

2014
Record:
4-12

Washington Redskins

4

THREE QUESTIONS

Three seasons after winning Offensive Rookie of the Year, Robert Griffin III wears the label of damaged goods. He's had one reconstructive knee surgery (right), one dislocated ankle (left) and at least two concussions (including one that sidelined him in the preseason, allowing backup Kirk Cousins to muddy the Redskins' QB situation), and, most troubling, he's been benched by two coaches. The team, however, appears committed to salvaging their onetime prize.

In April, Washington picked up the fifth-year option on Griffin's contract, guaranteeing him \$16.1 million in 2016, healthy or not. To maximize returns on the '12 No. 2 pick for which the team gave up three first-rounders and a second-rounder, the Redskins are asking Griffin to stop winning games with his legs—as he did so spectacularly as a rookie, scrambling for 815 rushing yards while leading Washington to an NFC East title—and rely more on his arm and his mind.

SIMON BRUTY FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (LEFT); NORM HALL/GETTY IMAGES

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2015 SCHEDULE

SI'S PREDICTION: 3-13

SEPT. 13



SEPT. 20



SEPT. 24



OCT. 4



OCT. 11



THURSDAY

■ HOME □ AWAY

"Recapturing the magic of 2012" is a popular but unrealistic story line in Washington—and one that, according to recent reports, some coaches may have already moved on from. When the Redskins drafted Griffin, then-coach Mike Shanahan and his son, coordinator Kyle Shanahan, directed one of the most drastic scheme adjustments built around one player's talent that the league has ever seen. But that style was not sustainable, and Griffin, battered by injuries, became reluctant to use his legs. Flaws in his mechanics and decision-making became more obvious, and Washington has since then been scrambling to adapt. "He's 25 and he's already been through so much," says second-year coach Jay Gruden. "We just need him to play quarterback for us and forget all the outside stuff."

This off-season Washington (controlled by new general manager Scot McCloughan)



THEMMQB.COM INSIDER

ANDY BENOIT ON THE REDSKINS' OFFENSIVE RICHES

Look closely at Washington's offense and you'll see that it's just a quarterback away from greatness. Alfred Morris is one of the game's best zone runners, particularly on the perimeter, and the Redskins do a great job of maximizing his abilities with halfback tosses and sweeps. Out wide, DeSean Jackson (*above*) is lethal tracking the ball deep or running after the catch on shorter patterns; he led the league with 13 catches of 40 yards or more last season.

(The next best, Green Bay's Jordy Nelson, had eight.) Opposite Jackson is Pierre Garçon, a superb possession target who thrives on slants and comebacks. Then there's Jordan Reed, who is athletically the smoothest tight end in football. If the 2013 third-rounder can stay healthy, he's great at creating mismatches. Up front vast improvements are expected with the additions of No. 5 draft pick Brandon Scherff (Iowa) at right tackle

and venerated offensive line coach Bill Callahan. Then there's coach Jay Gruden, who is one of the league's best play designers. Gruden understands how to sync route combinations to outleverage coverages, especially zones. Gruden's test this year will be to help RG3 deliver the ball to all these talented targets.

hired venerable assistant Matt Cavanaugh as a quarterbacks coach, which the team did not have last season. Cavanaugh can focus on Griffin's mechanics while Gruden spreads his attention across the rest of the roster. "We have to help keep the weight of the world off of Robert's shoulders," says Gruden, looking to reverse trajectory for a team that has won just seven games over the last two seasons.

Gruden plans on incorporating a heavy dose of play-action and screens while emphasizing patience and decision-making in the pocket. This will help Griffin get the ball into the hands of DeSean Jackson, Pierre Garçon, Jordan Reed, Alfred Morris and the other talents that Washington has returning on offense.

On defense, McCloughan emphasized improving Washington's front seven, using free agency to add 354-pound-but-light-footed nosetackle Terrance (Pot Roast) Knighton from Denver and block-shedding defensive end Stephen Paea from Chicago. With new defensive coordinator Joe Barry installing a one-gap hybrid 3-4 scheme, Knighton and Paea will generate enough interior pressure to liberate outside linebacker Ryan Kerrigan. Junior Galette was supposed to line up alongside Kerrigan, but he sustained a season-ending left Achilles tear in camp. The Redskins were banking on the troubled but talented linebacker (who recorded 22 sacks over the last two seasons before being released by the Saints) as a spark. He will be replaced by either second-round pick Preston Smith (Mississippi State) or second-year player Trent Murphy.

A more vigorous pass rush will be essential in front of a weak secondary. A year ago opposing quarterbacks had a 108.3 passer rating against Washington, and that was against a soft schedule that did not include Aaron Rodgers, Ben Roethlisberger, Peyton Manning or Tom Brady. Promising second-year corner Bashaud Breeland sprained his MCL in a noncontact training camp drill and will miss four to six weeks. Defensive back DeAngelo Hall is coming off two operations on a torn Achilles heel, while strong safety Duke Ihenacho missed all but three games in 2014 with a broken bone in his left foot. The Redskins acquired veteran free safety Dashon Goldson in an April trade with the Buccaneers, but the two-time Pro Bowler, 31, has a propensity for surrendering big plays and is a short-term solution at best.

Still, it all comes back to Griffin, because in today's NFL it is nearly impossible to win without a steady quarterback. He may not be the Redskins' savior, as hoped, but he still has time to prove he won't be their demise.

—E.K.

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NYJ L	TB L	BYE	NE L	NO L	CAR L	NYG L	DAL L	CHI L	BUF W	PHI L	DAL L
							MONDAY			SATURDAY	



QB Aaron Rodgers

NFC
NORTH

2014
Record:
12-4

Green Bay Packers



HANDS OFF

After leading the NFL in scoring last year (30.4 ppg), the Packers were one special teams gaffe away from playing in Super Bowl XLIX. A botched onside kick recovery with 2:09 remaining in January's NFC championship game against Seattle marked the biggest blunder in Green Bay's 15-point meltdown.

Mike McCarthy's response? He's lessened his offensive responsibilities. The 10th-year coach has surrendered play-calling duties for 2015, the franchise's most drastic structural change since firing defensive coordinator Bob Sanders six years ago. McCarthy's supervision wasn't the issue—twice in the past four years Green Bay has boasted the NFL's top O—but rather, the coach wants global oversight. He believes that some areas, specifically special teams, suffered from his focusing so intensely on offensive minutiae. Assistant Tom Clements will now call plays. (McCarthy also fired special teams coordinator Shawn Slocum, a longtime friend.) Explains the coach,

BILL HABER/AP

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2015 SCHEDULE

SI'S PREDICTION: 12-4

SEPT. 13



SEPT. 20



SEPT. 28



OCT. 4



OCT. 11



■ HOME □ AWAY

MONDAY

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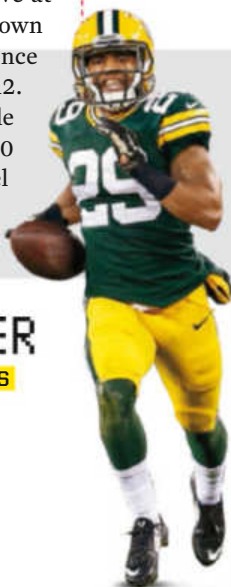
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"I'll see more of the game than I've seen in the past."

"It's not that he's ignoring the offense or doesn't trust himself to call plays," says receiver Randall Cobb. "He's just making sure every other part of our team is running smoothly too."

One could argue that an offense manned by MVP Aaron Rodgers doesn't need much maintenance anyway—especially with the loss of just one starter. Over the past four seasons, Rodgers has thrown 139 TDs to 25 interceptions. He's even more impressive at home: The 31-year-old has had 457 attempts, thrown 33 TDs and had zero regular-season losses since last throwing a pick at Lambeau Field, in 2012. You can attribute part of that to an impenetrable young line. That unit, which in '14 allowed 30 sacks (NFL average: 38), is considered a model for longevity. All five starters were drafted in-



THEMMQB.COM INSIDER

ANDY BENOIT ON THE PACKERS' GAMBLING WAYS

Defensive coordinator Dom Capers has always played high-risk, high-reward football featuring amoeba fronts and diversified coverages tied to various blitz designs. We've seen the upside of this (a nearly all-out blitz on a fourth-and-two play that resulted in Dez Bryant's disallowed catch late in last year's playoff victory over the Cowboys), and we've seen the downside (a true all-out blitz on the Seahawks' game-winning 35-yard TD to Jermaine Kearse

in OT the following week). That NFC championship disappointment aside, more times than not, Capers's aggressiveness pays off. For that to continue, the Packers need quality man-to-man defenders on the back end. It wasn't a surprise that 32-year-old corner Tramon Williams was allowed to leave in free agency; Casey Hayward (*above*) is better at this point, at least in the slot. It was a surprise that rising backup corner Davon House was similarly allowed to leave in free

agency—but just under two months later, GM Ted Thompson used his first-round pick on Damarious Randall (Arizona State), who costs a fraction of what House would have. How Hayward, Randall and last year's first-rounder, safety Ha Ha Clinton-Dix, develop will ultimately determine the efficacy of Green Bay's high-risk, high-reward approach.

house, and only one, '10 first-rounder Bryan Bulaga, was taken before the fourth round. Together they allow Rodgers to do what he does best: stand in the pocket and deliver accurate strikes. (It helps that he also senses pressure better than most pocket passers and extends plays with his legs when necessary.) The line adapts with Rodgers as he processes defenses and makes intuitive presnap adjustments, another reason McCarthy is comfortable in a reduced role.

The Packers were set to bring back their elite receiving unit in 2015—that is, until Jordy Nelson tore his right ACL in a preseason game. The loss of Nelson, a physical, vertical route-runner, is significant, but it's mitigated by promising second-year wideout Davante Adams, who steps into Nelson's No. 1 role alongside Cobb. Green Bay's coaching staff is extremely high on Adams, whom you may remember for his 100-yard games last year against the Patriots and the Cowboys. Stanford rookie Ty Montgomery, a thicker, stronger version of Cobb, gives the Packers yet another receiver who will generate extra yards after the catch. Balancing the attack is bruising third-year runner Eddie Lacy, who has barreled through tacklers for 1,100 yards in each of his first two seasons.

All of which is to say: *As long as the D holds together...* And, once again, that's a question mark. Both the secondary and linebacking units are in flux. At one point in camp, Green Bay had only four healthy bodies at outside 'backer. And five-time Pro Bowler Clay Matthews enters the year nursing a sore knee as he continues learning a new base position. Around midseason last year, when Green Bay was getting gashed on the ground, coordinator Dom Capers moved Matthews inside in sub packages. The Packers shored up their run D, and Capers is now expected to keep Matthews inside more often. That could change, of course, if fourth-round pick Jake Ryan (Michigan) proves himself inside alongside Sam Barrington.

Along the line, Green Bay re-signed nosetackles B.J. Raji and Letroy Guion to one-year deals but did not make any other additions, so it's up to Capers's creativity to improve with the existing talent. There's good reason for the Packers to be concerned about that run defense: Marshawn Lynch's Seahawks remain the top threat in the NFC, and Vikings running back Adrian Peterson has returned to the division after a one-year absence.

McCarthy is sitting in on most defensive and special teams meetings—something he did not do previously. But the fact is: The gaps in Green Bay's roster are far smaller than those of any other team in the NFC North. If the Packers collapse in 2015, their coach knows whom to hold accountable.

—E.K.

MIKE ROEMER/AP

OCT. 18



OCT. 25



NOV. 1



NOV. 8



NOV. 15



NOV. 22



NOV. 26



DEC. 3



DEC. 13



DEC. 20



DEC. 27



JAN. 3



THURSDAY

THURSDAY

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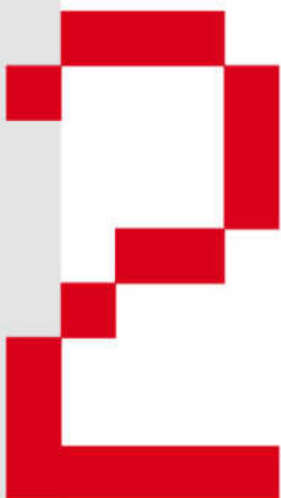


RB Adrian Peterson

NFC
NORTH

2014
Record:
7-9

Minnesota Vikings



THE SLEEPER'S SLEEPER

Adrian Peterson has provided, by necessity, a disproportionate amount of the Vikings' offensive firepower for much of his career, and especially in recent years, when he played with mediocre quarterbacks such as Tarvaris Jackson, Christian Ponder, Joe Webb and Matt Cassel. The last occasion on which the All-Pro running back lined up behind a healthy and above-average quarterback—40-year-old Brett Favre in 2009—the Vikings had the NFL's second-best offense.

Last year, though, while Peterson missed 15 games following an ugly child abuse incident that resulted in his taking a plea deal on criminal charges, something unexpected happened: Minnesota's offense began to thrive without him.

O.K., *thrive* probably is too strong a word. After all, three opposing defenses held this team to single digits in 2015, and the Vikings scored 19 points or fewer in nine of their games. But late in the year rookie quarter-

L.G. PATTERSON/AP (LEFT); BRACE HERMELGARN/USA TODAY SPORTS

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■ HOME □ AWAY

SEPT. 14



MONDAY

SEPT. 20



SEPT. 27



OCT. 4



OCT. 11





OLB DeAndre Levy

NFC
NORTH

2014
Record:
11-5

Detroit Lions



LIFE WITHOUT SUH

If you were judging the Lions' defense simply by the players general manager Martin Mayhew brought in this off-season, the outlook would be a rosy one. Mayhew added Pro Bowl defensive tackle Haloti Ngata, and he picked up a couple of promising youngsters at the same position in ex-Saint Tyrann Walker and fourth-round pick Gabe Wright. He also bolstered Detroit's secondary by drafting two cornerbacks (Alex Carter in the third round and Quandre Diggs in the sixth) and re-signing steady veteran Rashean Mathis. In addition the Lions will get back starting middle linebacker Stephen Tulloch and second-year outside linebacker Kyle Van Noy, both of whom missed significant parts of last year with injuries.

These are all reasons to be excited—until you are reminded that this off-season the Lions also lost Ndamukong Suh. Detroit built its defense around Suh from the moment they drafted the tackle at No. 2

KIRK THOMAS F. DOZIER/DETROIT FREE PRESS/MCT/LANDOV (LEFT); FRANK FRANKLIN/USA

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2015 SCHEDULE

SI'S PREDICTION: 6-10

SEPT. 13



SEPT. 20



SEPT. 27



OCT. 5



OCT. 11



■ HOME □ AWAY

MONDAY

in 2010. That unit peaked last year, ranking third in scoring defense and second in total defense—bests for the franchise since 1983 and '70, respectively.

But Suh left for Miami in March, signing a six-year, \$114 million contract that, while it could eventually hamstring the Dolphins' books, is not incongruous with the defensive tackle's value. Shy of somehow swiping J.J. Watt from Houston, Mayhew was not going to find a comparable line talent.

The Lions are adamant that the Suh setback has been overblown, and that this year's defense could be better than last year's. It's like George Costanza used to say: "It's not a lie if you believe it."

For Detroit to stay on beat, several things have to happen, beginning with Ngata still being a fierce run-stuffer at age 31. The 345-pound former Raven will serve as an anchor on early downs, and he has

a set of linebackers behind him—including Tulloch, Van Noy and the outstanding DeAndre Levy—that can clean up on running plays if Ngata stands his ground.

It's against the pass, though, that the departures of Suh and 2011 first-rounder Nick Fairley (who signed with the Rams) will be felt the most. Suh generated 37 hurries last season and averaged 7.2 sacks during his five years with the Lions, while Fairley had 17 hurries and averaged 3.4 sacks. Now Detroit will look for pressure from the ex-Saint Walker, signed on the cheap for one year and \$1.75 million. He doesn't have great raw strength, but he is quick off the snap. Caraun Reid, a '14 fifth-round pick, has similar potential. And Devin Taylor saw reps inside during OTAs and at training camp; the 6' 7" third-year player could increase Detroit's flexibility along the line.

But even if all those moves work out, the Lions will still have to create pressure from elsewhere. With Suh, Detroit could afford to take a basic approach to the pass rush because the Suh-led front four regularly collapsed the pocket. This allowed the seven other Lions to drop into coverage. In 2013, the final year of Jim Schwartz's Detroit regime, the Lions blitzed on just 18.3% of their snaps, per Pro Football Focus, second fewest in the league. Last year under new defensive coordinator Teryl Austin, that number rose to 24.9%, which was 11th fewest in the league. This year Austin could dial up even more blitzes, perhaps making use of Van Noy, who had 13 sacks as a college junior, or safety James Ihedigbo, who had two sacks and two QB hurries on just 26 pass-rush attempts last season.

Asking linebackers and/or defensive backs to get after the quarterback will risk exposing Detroit's coverage defenders. Either way, though, the secondary will feel the heat. Football's version of the chicken-or-egg debate centers on defensive lines and defensive backs. Is it pressure up front that allows a secondary to thrive, or does a stout secondary create sacks by taking away receivers? Most would say that in Detroit, it's the D-line that has been making the DBs look good in recent years.

Mayhew had been quietly prepping his roster for the possibility that Suh would leave. The offense should be more balanced this year behind a physical line, and that will help limit the defense's time on the field. The defensive back seven is deeper than it has been in ages.

But what if Suh really was that good? What if the Lions cannot patch the hole his absence creates? Then all of Mayhew's work will have been for naught.

—C.B.

THEMMQB.COM INSIDER

ANDY BENOIT ON WHAT THE LIONS' AERIAL GAME NEEDS

Under previous coach Jim Schwartz, the Lions often put up big offensive numbers in losing efforts. Last season, while adjusting to the system of new offensive coordinator Joe Lombardi, Detroit fell to 19th in yards and 22nd in points, but it still made the playoffs riding a top-ranked run defense that also had a menacing four-man rush. With Detroit losing Ndamukong Suh and Nick Fairley, however, Matthew Stafford and his offense will have to

be more proficient. The question is, now that Stafford is in his second year in Lombardi's scheme, will he continue with his newfound discipline or will he revert to his old wild-stallion ways? Stafford can make every throw—even the ones he shouldn't attempt—but Lombardi doesn't want to play that way. He focuses on balance with the running game, diversity with screens and conservative pass protections. Stafford has a strong receiving duo in Calvin

Johnson and Golden Tate, but he needs a third target to emerge—preferably '14 first-round tight end Eric Ebron (*above*), who had only 25 receptions as a rookie but has the size and the athleticism to force tough matchup decisions. Without someone stepping up, the Lions' offense will struggle to offset what its defense has lost.



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CHI W	MIN L	KC L	BYE	GB L	OAK L	PHI W	GB W	STL L	NO W	SF L	CHI W
		IN LONDON				THURSDAY	THURSDAY		MONDAY		



QB Jay Cutler

NFC
NORTH

2014
Record:
5-11

Chicago Bears

4

THE CUTLER DILEMMA

Whenever a new coach or offensive coordinator is asked about Jay Cutler's untapped potential, soon the conversation begins to sound like a rom-com in which the heroine wants to tame the bad boy.

What makes you think you can change him?

I don't know, but I have to try.

That is essentially what Chicago's latest play-caller, offensive coordinator Adam Gase, offered up when quizzed on whether his system would help Cutler soar. "Time will tell," Gase said. "If I knew what was going to happen, I'd play the lottery. Right now I don't know."

Cutler has crafted a respectable, occasionally outstanding nine-year NFL career. He has 61 wins as a starter and should top 28,000 career passing yards by Week 2 of the regular season. But he has also thrown 130 interceptions, including league highs of 26 in 2009 and 18 last season. Most damning, Cutler has just one playoff win to his name.

KICHINO SATO/AP (LEFT); TONY AVELAR/AP

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2015 SCHEDULE

SI'S PREDICTION: 3-13

SEPT. 13



SEPT. 20



SEPT. 27



OCT. 4



OCT. 11



But watch Cutler sling the ball in practice and you'll see why he continues to be given chances. Even at 32, Cutler possesses arguably the strongest arm in the NFL. When he has time to set and fire, the ball explodes out of his hand with the exit velocity of a Giancarlo Stanton home run. The challenge for Gase, like others who have come before, is to translate Cutler's talent into more consistent performances.

Foremost is Gase's plan to move the pocket more often, thus taking advantage of Cutler's underrated athleticism. Cutler has been agreeable to this idea, at least publicly—those rollouts would buy him more time (in 2014, Cutler took 38 sacks, eighth most in the league and tied for second most in his career) and help keep the defense off-balance. Other big-armed quarterbacks, such as Baltimore's Joe Flacco, have thrived using bootlegs to set up the deep ball.

THEMMQB.COM INSIDER

ANDY BENOIT ON THE BEARS' SCHEME SWITCH

For the past 16 years the Bears have run a classic Cover Two-based zone defense. Every personnel decision was made with this scheme in mind. But after last season it was finally time for a change. Without Pro Bowlers such as Brian Urlacher (retired), Lance Briggs (missed eight games) and Peanut Tillman (missed 14 games), Chicago's vanilla scheme went stale. New Bears defensive coordinator Vic Fangio is a 3-4 acolyte. And though new coach John

Fox, himself a former defensive coordinator, has run 4-3 schemes for much of his career, he figures to cede significant defensive say to Fangio. Expect a tough transition this first year. Only three current Bears are truly fits for the roles Fangio desires: intriguing sophomore CB Kyle Fuller (*above*) and free-agent signees Antrel Rolle (safety) and Pernell McPhee (a hybrid front-seven player). Aside from a role player



here and there, the rest of the defensive roster is likely to be turned over before long. In the meantime the Bears, for the first time in ages, will employ a high volume of new two-gap concepts on first and second downs, plus designer blitzes on third downs, as Fangio tries to scheme his way through a season of change.

The second change, unheralded but key, is the addition of receiver Eddie Royal, who signed with the Bears for \$15 million over three years. Last season, even with the exceptional pass catching of running back Matt Forte and the receiving tandem of Brandon Marshall and Alshon Jeffery, the Bears did not have a piece as movable within the offense as the 5' 10" Royal. Mostly the ex-Charger will line up in the slot, but he can work out of the backfield or shift outside—and he may have to play outside if Kevin White, drafted in the first round to replace the departed Marshall, ends up missing the entire season because of a stress fracture in his left shin.

Royal's best NFL year came as a Broncos rookie in 2008, when Cutler was his quarterback. Royal caught 91 passes on 129 targets for 980 yards, all career bests by substantial margins. The 29-year-old veteran then spent three seasons working under Gase, who was Denver's receivers coach in '09 and '10 and quarterbacks coach in '11. Given Royal's history with his new QB and coordinator, expect to see him thrown to early and often.

If these changes don't help, the Bears may be nearing the breakup point with Cutler. After coach John Fox and GM Ryan Pace took charge of the Bears this off-season, rumors circulated that they were trying to deal their divisive quarterback. Cutler's bulky contract—he is due \$33.5 million over the next two years—made trading him unrealistic, but Chicago could save a little cash by releasing him after the 2015 season and could recoup as much as \$14 million if it shows Cutler a pink slip once the '16 campaign wraps.

Two seasons ago, when Marc Trestman took over as coach, Chicago narrowly missed out on the playoffs despite being shackled with a 30th-ranked defense. If this year's D can be even halfway decent in its first season under Fox and new coordinator Vic Fangio, the offense has enough, on paper, to fuel another playoff run. Between Forte, Royal, Jeffery, White (possibly) and tight end Martellus Bennett, the Bears certainly possess their share of playmakers. The offensive line needs to be more effective than it was last season, but Gase's new scheme should play to its strengths.

Fair or not, then, the onus will fall back on Cutler. He has teased teammates, fans and coaches alike with his skills, only to spend each summer answering questions about his failures.

Gase's arrival may signal the last—and best—chance Cutler has.

—C.B.

OCT. 18	OCT. 25	NOV. 1	NOV. 9	NOV. 15	NOV. 22	NOV. 26	DEC. 6	DEC. 13	DEC. 20	DEC. 27	JAN. 3
DET L	BYE	MIN L	SD L	STL L	DEN L	GB L	SF L	WAS W	MIN L	TB W	DET L
			MONDAY			THURSDAY					



T Michael Oher

NFC
SOUTH

2014
Record:
7-8-1

Carolina Panthers



GOING IN BLIND

Was it time to panic? In his first padded practice of training camp, Michael Oher suffered a mild case of windburn, with Carolina defenders beating him soundly three times in individual drills. This was verging on a worst-case scenario for Panthers GM Dave Gettleman, whose solution for last year's abysmal left-tackle play was to sign Oher to a two-year, \$7 million deal—this despite the fact that the seven-year vet out of Ole Miss has struggled in recent seasons to be even a serviceable tackle, yielding 103 pressures in his last 28 starts. The Titans cut ties with him last February—less than a year after signing him to a four-year deal. Playing right tackle for Tennessee, he'd often floundered, finishing the season at No. 75 out of 84 tackles in Pro Football Focus's positional rankings.

Show a little faith. Have some patience. Take it easy on the big guy. This was the message from Carolina coach Ron Rivera following Oher's underwhelming—even alarming—training camp debut. Rivera pointed out

JACOB KUPFERMAN/CSM (LEFT); AL TIELEMANS FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
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2015 SCHEDULE

SI'S PREDICTION: 9-7

SEPT. 13



SEPT. 20



SEPT. 27



OCT. 4



OCT. 11



that, after two seasons at right tackle, Oher (on whom the book and movie *The Blind Side* were based) had flopped back to the blind side. As a result of that move, “He was a little bit rusty coming out of his stance,” noted Rivera, “but as practice went on and he started getting into the team events, I thought he looked really good.”

In the intervening weeks Rivera has been proved right. Oher settled in, and has looked more comfortable at left tackle. He appeared solid in several series against Buffalo in Carolina’s preseason opener, stalemating a pair of superb pass rushers, Mario Williams and Jerry Hughes.

Oher’s return to the blind side seems to have been smoothed by Carolina offensive line coach John Matsko, who held that title for the Ravens from 2008 through ’10. Oher has a high comfort level with Matsko, who mentored him in ’09 when he made the NFL all-rookie team and earned a



THEMMQB.COM INSIDER

ANDY BENOIT ON WHAT CAM NEWTON NEEDS TO SUCCEED

This off-season the Panthers committed to Cam Newton (above) in two very telling ways. One was obvious: a new five-year contract. The other was more subtle: the second-round selection of Devin Funchess. At 6' 4" and 225 pounds, the Michigan receiver is very similar to last year's first-round pick, 6' 5", 245-pound Kelvin Benjamin (who tore his left ACL in training camp and will miss the season). Both are possession targets with—and here's the key—a wide catching

radius. Consider this Carolina's tacit admission that Newton, with his unsteady mechanics and proclivity for strong-arming the ball, will likely never become a precision or anticipatory passer. So whereas most teams would need at least some speed and quickness at wide receiver, the Panthers are fine with having only size. This is also true at tight end: Greg Olsen moves well, but his game is predicated on his being 6' 6", 253 pounds. Typically,

Newton's sort of inconsistency would be grounds for a discussion, at least, about a quarterback change. But he makes the occasional *Wow!* throw, and his mobility alters the equation. Not only is he a chains-moving scrambler, he's also the engine of the multifaceted zone-read ground game that defines this offense.

plus-20.0 overall grade from Pro Football Focus—the last time he's been in positive integers.

Much is riding on Oher's ability to reverse that trajectory. This off-season the Panthers went all-in on fifth-year quarterback Cam Newton, signing him to a five-year, \$103.8 million deal (\$60 million guaranteed, the sixth-most lucrative at the position). It *should* be money well spent: Newton's combination of size, speed and arm strength make him—when he has time—one of the NFL's most versatile, dangerous players.

That is, when he's not being pounded into steak tartare. In his first four seasons Newton absorbed an undoddy 587 shots—sacks or hits—which is almost twice as many as the next-closest piñata (Seattle's Russell Wilson, with 317). Yes, number 1 needs to find the sideline more often on his forays outside the pocket. He will also need help from Oher.

Matsko has experience with reclamation projects. Poor line play—slipshod protection, in particular—had much to do with the Panthers' ghastly 1-8-1 stretch from mid-September through November last season. With Matsko feverishly juggling line combinations (Carolina went through seven of them between Weeks 6 and 13), he settled, finally, on the right five guys. The Panthers won their final four games and the NFC South.

Two key pieces to that puzzle were undrafted. Right tackle Mike Remmers is playing for his sixth team in four seasons; the former Oregon State walk-on was toiling on the Rams' practice squad when the desperate Panthers signed him off waivers two days before Halloween, plugging him into their starting lineup three games later. In five games Remmers yielded only five quarterback pressures and no sacks. Another revelation: Andrew Norwell, an undrafted rookie out of Ohio State, who came on in relief of injured starter (and fellow rookie) Trai Turner in Week 7. A surprisingly effective downfield blocker, Norwell has made up for his lack of technical prowess by being relentless, loud and nasty.

The unit's cornerstone is center Ryan Kalil, a four-time Pro Bowler who expressed his relief, at the start of training camp, that the line appears far more stable than it did this time a year ago: “We’re in a lot better place this year than we were last year.”

Just how much better a place will depend upon whether Oher can find some of his old form, and salvage his career. And if he can stay on the field: His designated backup, 49ers cast-off Jonathan Martin, abruptly retired in the off-season, and the options aren't great behind him. Should Oher go down, it might just be time for the Panthers to panic.

—A.M.

OCT. 18	OCT. 25	NOV. 2	NOV. 8	NOV. 15	NOV. 22	NOV. 26	DEC. 6	DEC. 13	DEC. 20	DEC. 27	JAN. 3
SEA L	PHI L	IND L	GB W	TEN W	WAS W	DAL L	NO W	ATL W	NYG W	ATL W	TB W
		MONDAY				THURSDAY					



NFC
SOUTH

2014
Record:
7-9

New Orleans Saints



A SURPRISE RENOVATION

As a disappointing 2014 season ended and the Saints evaluated their next steps, the overwhelming consensus was that the franchise, despite its second losing season in three years, didn't require a personnel overhaul. It just needed to reset the tone of the locker room. Players weren't holding each other accountable, and that had rarely been an issue since '06, when coach Sean Payton and quarterback Drew Brees arrived in New Orleans.

"If you see someone doing not the right thing, that's on you," says right tackle and captain Zach Strief, himself a 2006 arrival. "You don't need Coach Payton to be sprinting around the field telling guys, 'That's not how we do things.' That's our job."

"There were a lot of questions last year about leadership, so as a captain, if you don't take that personally, you shouldn't be in this position."

But then the off-season happened. In March an exploratory call to Seattle escalated into a jaw-dropping

GREGORY SHAMUS/GETTY IMAGES (LEFT); STEPHEN LEWIS/CSM

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2015 SCHEDULE

SI'S PREDICTION: 9-7

SEPT. 13



SEPT. 20



SEPT. 27



OCT. 4



OCT. 11





NFC
SOUTH

2014
Record:
6-10

Atlanta Falcons



FEELING HAWKISH

When the Falcons began training camp, only 30 players who reported had played eight or more games with the team in 2014. While Atlanta does bring back all but five starters, combine the broader roster turnover with an all-new coaching staff (Mike Smith, who'd been with the team for seven seasons, was fired in December), and you'll see: Nothing here is quite the same.

One of the few stable elements, quarterback Matt Ryan—he's entering his eighth season as the Falcons' starter—says that at times he feels like a rookie. For years he took the mundane details of his football existence for granted: practice times, meals, meeting locations. Now it's all changed, and he finds himself studying his schedule each morning.

Change, though, was necessary. In 2013 and '14, Smith and his staff suffered consecutive losing seasons, which hadn't happened in Atlanta since '06-'07,

DALE ZAMINE/USA TODAY SPORTS

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2015 SCHEDULE

SI'S PREDICTION: 6-10

■ HOME □ AWAY

SEPT. 14



MONDAY

SEPT. 20



SEPT. 27



OCT. 4



OCT. 11





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right before the Falcons drafted Ryan. Even if Atlanta was technically in the woeful NFC South title race until Week 17 last season, its defense had slipped from passable to atrocious, and bringing in Dan Quinn, the coordinator for Seattle's vaunted defense, was a no-brainer. Add in the great first impression Quinn made in interviews and the ringing endorsements he received from coaches and general managers around the league, and the Falcons had their man.

Quinn comes to Atlanta with a high-energy approach and a clear desire to create something more than the Seahawks East. Although his methods—short, intense practices with blaring music and plenty of coach-player interaction—are reminiscent of what Pete Carroll has built with Seattle, Quinn says he'll tailor his approach to this team's personnel.



THEMMQB.COM INSIDER

ANDY BENOIT ON THE FALCONS' NEW MOBILITY

Following the 2013 season the Falcons' coaching staff made a list of 10 priorities for their team heading into '14. Item No. 10: Make more plays off quarterback mobility. Matt Ryan (*above*), a tremendous but mostly stationary drop-back passer, took this to heart. By Week 3, coaches were saying that Ryan had already made more plays with his feet in '14 than he had in his previous six seasons. Ryan showcased his new strength

throughout the year, making throws on the run or leaving the pocket and resetting to improve his passing angle. Now, with Atlanta's new coaches, Ryan will play in a system that heavily features quarterback movement. Offensive coordinator Kyle Shanahan's zone-blocking scheme sets up a natural play-action passing game predicated on rollouts, bootlegs and sliding pockets. Shanahan won't put Ryan on the move as often as he did

Brian Hoyer last year in Cleveland or Robert Griffin III in Washington. Unlike those QBs, Ryan is still most dangerous in the pocket, and traditional drop-backs are the way you take downfield shots with wide receiver Julio Jones. But Atlanta's iffy O-line will at times hinder deeper drops, and that's when Ryan can go on the move.

About that personnel. Offensively, Atlanta was in the top 10 in the NFL in total yards (6,051) and completed passes (418) a year ago, which has been par for the course during Ryan's tenure. But the Falcons' running game was awful because of the continued and protracted demise of Steven Jackson, who was released after the season. In the draft Atlanta added Tevin Coleman (Indiana), the fifth running back selected, and under new coordinator Kyle Shanahan (who escaped Cleveland and Johnny Manziel to join Quinn's staff), Atlanta's offense in 2015 will employ more of a zone-blocking scheme. That should allow the Falcons to improve their offensive versatility and balance and offset a deficient offensive line.

"Kyle's always been kind of a chameleon," Ryan says of his coordinator. "When he was in Houston, they led the league in passing. When he was in Washington, they used the zone [blocking] scheme [and led the NFL in rushing]. The thing I love about him is he kind of adapts to the personnel he has."

Defensively, Quinn plans to bring speed and aggression to a foundering unit that was never the Falcons' strong suit under the previous regime, even though Smith had come from a defensive background. In 2014, Atlanta finished dead last in the NFL in yards allowed per game (398.2), passing yards allowed per game (279.9), yards allowed per play (6.14), third-down percentage (46.8) and first downs allowed per game (22.4). These Falcons must find a way to manufacture a pass rush after logging just 22 sacks (tied for second worst in the NFL), which opens the door for first-round pick Vic Beasley, who had 12 sacks as a senior at Clemson, to make an immediate impression.

Quinn and new coordinator Richard Smith are undertaking one of the league's biggest defensive rebuilds, and it's optimistic to think that it can be accomplished in a season. Yes, getting a healthy (and 15 pounds lighter) William Moore back at strong safety will help after his shoulder injury last year, but don't be surprised if Atlanta still finds itself in more than a few 31–28 shootouts.

With an offense boasting Ryan and Pro Bowl receiver Julio Jones, and Shanahan's gift for developing a running game, not to mention the wide-open division, the Falcons' defense doesn't have to be great to play in January. A 9–7 record may well win the South. Even with Quinn, though, that might not be within reach in his first year.

—J.N.

AL THELMANS FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

OCT. 15



THURSDAY

OCT. 25



NOV. 1



NOV. 8



NOV. 15



NOV. 22



NOV. 29



DEC. 6



DEC. 13



DEC. 20



DEC. 27



JAN. 3





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QB Jameis Winston

NFC
SOUTH

2014
Record:
2-14

Tampa Bay Buccaneers



THE REVIVAL BEGINS

As a hundred fans chanted his name from the bleachers (said chants peppered with calls of “leave him alone, media”), Jameis Winston said all the right things on Aug. 4. The Buccaneers’ rookie quarterback, the No. 1 pick in last spring’s draft, insists he doesn’t care an iota about the team’s past—even if Tampa’s 2–14 record last season still factors big time in the way the team looks at 2015.

Without the Buccaneers’ complete meltdown in coach Lovie Smith’s first season, they would never have been able to pick Winston out of Florida State. This time last year they couldn’t have imagined a scenario in which they’d be the first team on the clock come April. (Neither could SI, which picked the Bucs to win the division and finish 11–5.) But after Tampa’s offense, behind quarterbacks Josh McCown and Mike Glennon, finished 30th in the league in total yards, the front office knew exactly what it needed.

BRACE HEIMELGARN/USA TODAY SPORTS (LEFT); GARY BOGDON FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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SEPTEMBER 7, 2015

2015 SCHEDULE

SI'S PREDICTION: 5-11

■ HOME □ AWAY

SEPT. 13



THURSDAY

SEPT. 20



SEPT. 27



OCT. 4



OCT. 11



When the Bucs interviewed offensive coordinators in the off-season—the team did without one in 2014 after Jeff Tedford underwent an angioplasty procedure in September—they saw a good deal of interest from around the league, says general manager Jason Licht. Prospective coordinators knew they would be getting a franchise quarterback (whether that was Winston or Marcus Mariota, the eventual No. 2 pick) and an attractive top target in second-year receiver Mike Evans, who had 1,051 receiving yards and was tied for the lead among rookie wideouts with 12 touchdown catches in '14.

In the end Licht and Smith went with Dirk Koetter (who previously held the same role in Atlanta and Jacksonville), a sensible hire. With the Falcons, Koetter led a productive offense that featured a talented quarterback, a deep group of play-making receivers and a shaky offensive line—all



of which the Bucs have, for better or worse. Under Smith, a defensive-minded coach, Koetter will have the freedom to which he's accustomed.

From the start of training camp Winston was impressive, primarily with his ability to read the field and his mental grasp of the game. "You can see it with his arm and the way he understands the plays," veteran guard Logan Mankins says. "He's not back there just reading one guy. He's making his progressions." Still, a turnaround, especially an immediate one, demands more than a No. 1 quarterback and a new coordinator. Tampa allowed 52 sacks last season; only Washington and Jacksonville ceded more. After selecting Winston, the Bucs drafted two offensive linemen in the second round, tackle Donovan Smith and guard Ali Marpet. Smith will likely open the season as the Buccaneers' left tackle, but these moves may not be enough to protect Winston, who at times was manhandled in his first preseason action. Still, the Bucs are aware of their shortcomings, and on Aug. 17 they signed former Colt Gosder Cherilus, who was cut by Indy after he was slow to recover from a knee injury. If he's healthy, he could be an upgrade at right tackle.

On the other side of the ball Tampa made fewer changes; in fact, in the two years since Licht took over as general manager, the Bucs have drafted exactly one defensive player, linebacker Kwon Alexander, in the fourth round in 2015. Tampa has talent on defense; the Bucs brought back tackle Gerald McCoy and linebacker Lavonte David, who signed a five-year, \$50.25 million extension in early August. A year ago McCoy and company consistently were victimized by terrible field position, the offense's quick drives leaving them frequently exhausted. Those factors, more than skill, explain why the Bucs surrendered the eighth-most yards in the league.

Despite its dismal record, Tampa lost eight games by six points or fewer, and according to Pythagorean Wins, a method derived from point differential to calculate a team's expected win-loss record, the Bucs should have had 4.5 victories rather than just two. "We were losing so many close games, which was heartbreaking," Licht says. Smith doesn't accept that defense, though. "Statistics are for losers," he says.

Still, with that shaky offensive line and a defense that will struggle to create a pass rush, whatever success Tampa has this year will be dependent on Winston—and only a once-in-a-generation quarterback can turn a 2–14 team into a contender. —J.N.

THEMMQB.COM INSIDER

ANDY BENOIT ON THE BUCCANEERS' FLAWED D

There's no mystery to Lovie Smith's defense: It's a classic zone scheme that features two high safeties on passing downs (i.e., Cover Two). Smith will use disguises before the snap, often threatening interior blitz looks, but postsnap his defenders most often wind up in their usual spots—which has become the scheme's flaw. Cover Two soared in the late 1990s and 2000s because its simplicity allowed defenders to think less and play faster. But eventually offenses devised

ways to attack it. Some of those ways: throwing into its gaps at the 15-to-20-yard range, aligning receivers in unbalanced 3-by-1 sets or simply running the ball with safeties back deep. To make the Cover Two work, you need speedy linebackers, smart defensive backs—smart will do, they don't have to be All-Pros athletically—and, most important, a dominant pass rush. Without a pass rush threatening him, a QB can hold the ball and let the zone's gaps

naturally expand. The Bucs' best pass rusher, aside from Gerald McCoy (football's premier gap-shooting defensive tackle, *above*), is little-known, undrafted fourth-year end Jacques Smith, who had 6½ sacks in '14 (all of them after Week 8). That's it, and that's another problem: There's not enough firepower in Tampa's four-man rush.

OCT. 18	OCT. 25	NOV. 1	NOV. 8	NOV. 15	NOV. 22	NOV. 29	DEC. 6	DEC. 13	DEC. 17	DEC. 27	JAN. 3
BYE	WAS W	ATL L	NYG L	DAL L	PHI L	IND L	ATL W	NO W	STL L	CHI L	CAR L
									THURSDAY		



TE Jimmy Graham

NFC
WEST

2014
Record:
12-4

Seattle Seahawks



A NEW FLIGHT PLAN

Upon his arrival in Seattle, tight end Jimmy Graham found rush-hour traffic more constrictive than NFL defenses. His solution: not to weave through or around gridlock but to go over it, in a rebuilt World War II-era seaplane, the de Havilland Canada Beaver DHC-2. "Seaplanes are like the taxis of the Pacific Northwest," says Graham. "I'm basically rebuilding one so I can fly to work."

There's a metaphor in there somewhere, about the prolific pass catcher who moonlights as a pilot and an offense defined by its ground game that is now hoping to take flight. That's why the Seahawks dealt their center, Max Unger, and their 2015 first-round pick to obtain Graham from the Saints this off-season.

Graham is a certified pilot who became infatuated with stunt planes while in college at Miami and owns two single-engine aircrafts that he left back home in Florida. He didn't know if he would be able to fly

JAMIE SQUARE/GETTY IMAGES (LEFT); JOHN W. MOONDOUGH FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
SEPTEMBER 7, 2015

2015 SCHEDULE

SI'S PREDICTION: 12-4

SEPT. 13



SEPT. 20



SEPT. 27



OCT. 5



OCT. 11



■ HOME □ AWAY

MONDAY

The same went for attendees who sat packed into metal bleachers at the Seahawks' sold-out training camp. That's where a deejay played music so loud it echoed and Graham punctuated each of his myriad touchdowns with spikes Rob Gronkowski could appreciate. At 6' 7" and 260 pounds, and with three Pro Bowl nods in five NFL seasons, Graham is in every way the Seahawks' biggest off-season addition. "It's like a fairy tale being here," he said. "Obviously, I



ANDY BENOIT ON THE SEAHAWKS' POWER RUN GAME

Russell Wilson's mobility is a crucial factor in Seattle's powerhouse ground game, and the threat he poses as a read-option ballcarrier benefits Marshawn Lynch (*above*) tremendously. When defenses are playing zone, Lynch faces defenders who must keep an eye on the quarterback and are therefore less likely to react quickly; if the defense is in man-to-man, the defender dedicated to Wilson is initially removed from the equation. But there's much more to Seattle's ground

game than the read-option. Thanks to Lynch's ability to gain tough yards after contact, Seattle has one of the best zone rushing attacks in football. Most of Seattle's runs come on "outside zone" concepts, where the offensive line moves laterally. ("Inside zone" features straight downhill blocking with linemen double-teaming defenders up front and then working up to the linebackers.) On outside zone plays, a runner identifies a hole, makes one cut

and goes. Typically this takes patience. The powerful and aggressive Lynch, however, plays with almost none. He cuts up before even crossing his center on about four out of every five zone runs (according to ESPN). Making his move so quickly minimizes the mediocrity of Seattle's O-line and further capitalizes on the distraction created by Wilson.

came from a winning program. I've won games, broken records. But this seems like the next step in my career."

He paused. “For so long,” he said, “I was an enemy of this team.”

Graham's Saints lost to Seattle three times in the postseason, and he famously scuffled with Seahawks defensive end Bruce Irvin before a playoff game in 2014 at CenturyLink Field. The healing started in April, in Hawaii, on a team-bonding trip organized by quarterback Russell Wilson. There, Graham and Irvin hashed out their issues and even posted a picture on social media of a fake fight between them.

Graham said he emphasized that he was not soft, that he could block, that he didn't care only about statistics. "I'm not a *me* guy," he said. "I'm here to win games. Simple as that."

The Hawaii jaunt also introduced Graham to the Seahawks' culture, where individuality is celebrated and a pilot fits in fine. Coach Pete Carroll quizzed Graham on his flight plans and asked to join him for a voyage. Graham said the Saints "weren't always so happy about me flying."

Seattle's retooling started after Super Bowl XLIX ended with Wilson's interception by Patriots cornerback Malcolm Butler—on a play near the goal line that begged for a tight end with Graham's size and skill set. Seattle also snagged cornerback Cary Williams from the Eagles to replace the departed Byron Maxwell, and drafted Frank Clark, a defensive end from Michigan, and Tyler Lockett, a speedy returner-receiver from Kansas State. The Seahawks also found time to ink extensions for franchise cornerstones in Wilson and All-Pro linebacker Bobby Wagner.

Graham seems to be an immediate fit in Seattle. He said Wilson called or sent him text messages every day after the trade, and he described their connection as instant. “Oh, it’s awesome,” Carroll gushes.

The move will require some adjustments. Wilson scrambles and improvises in ways that the Saints' Drew Brees did not. Then there are the shooting contests in the team auditorium, where the low ceilings limit the arch on Graham's shot. "Hopefully we can get a dunk contest in there," Graham says. "I guarantee I won't lose that."

Graham plans, once the seaplane is rebuilt, to shuttle teammates to practice via the now-friendly skies. It will likely be the NFL's first plane pool, and one led by a player who never fit neatly into any one position. That's Jimmy Graham: tight end, receiver, pilot.

—Greg Bishop

—Greg Bishop



QB Nick Foles

NFC
WEST

2014
Record:
6-10

St. Louis Rams



THE OFFENSE'S TURN

On March 13, the Rams had themselves a day. Already set to trot out Nick Foles as their new quarterback (having traded Sam Bradford and his one working knee to the Eagles), they welcomed a surprise guest to the news conference: Nick Fairley, the second-best defensive tackle on the free-agent market behind Ndamukong Suh. Fairley, a former Lion had just signed a one-year, incentive-laden deal worth up to \$7.5 million in St. Louis.

These are the kind of moves one might expect from the Rams—address one weakness but in the process keep stocking their defensive line, which now has five first-round picks. Since general manager Les Snead and coach Jeff Fisher arrived in St. Louis in 2012, they've been obsessed with building the NFL's best D-line, sometimes at the expense of investing in other units. And what they've built is impressive. Not only have they picked linemen high, but they've also picked

KYLE TERADA/USA TODAY SPORTS

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SEPTEMBER 7, 2015

2015 SCHEDULE

SI'S PREDICTION: 11-5

SEPT. 13



SEPT. 20



SEPT. 27



OCT. 4



OCT. 11



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AUTO | HOME | LIFE

good ones, including All-Pro Robert Quinn and '14 Defensive Rookie of the Year Aaron Donald, who could easily contend for Defensive Player of the Year in the next few seasons. So, Fairley or no Fairley, St. Louis's front four was going to be strong, but a defensive line, no matter how talented it is, cannot alone lift a team to a winning record—or, in the Rams' case, a winning record for the first time in more than a decade.

What will give St. Louis that final push—which they seem poised to make, although predicting a playoff berth this season is a stretch—is their decision to cut ties with Bradford, who was the No. 1 pick in 2010 but started just 49 games for St. Louis, including seven over the last two seasons. Foles, who went 14–4 as a starter in his two years under Chip Kelly in Philadelphia, will boost an offense that averaged the fifth-fewest yards of any team a



THEMMQB.COM INSIDER

ANDY BENOIT ON THE RAMS' STACKED DEFENSE

The Rams are poised to supplant the Seahawks as the most electric defense in the NFL. In their second season under coordinator Gregg Williams, this young and ridiculously talented group finally has a grasp on the various pressure concepts, alignments and coverage disguises that Williams, a mad scientist with an appetite for risk, has built his career on. St. Louis has good—but not yet great—off-coverage corners in Janoris Jenkins and Trumaine Johnson.

If those two were a tick better, Williams might be compelled to simply play a straight 4–3, as most coaches employ a more basic design when they have the more talented personnel. But Williams has a considerable advantage with the rest of this talented group. Robert Quinn is the game's most explosive edge-rusher, and next to him is the most explosive interior rusher, second-year pro Aaron Donald (*above*). At linebacker, Williams has shrewd veteran James

Laurinaitis and Alec Ogletree, who in his third season is on the cusp of the league's elite. At strong safety is the best player you've probably never heard of: T.J. McDonald. A lanky 6' 2" and 217 pounds, the third-year pro stalks the field with a natural range that creates even more possibilities for Williams's schemes.

year ago, largely behind Bradford backups Shaun Hill and Austin Davis. If running back Todd Gurley, who was still a first-round pick despite tearing his ACL at Georgia last season, returns fully healthy, the Rams will have their best offensive arsenal in a decade. (For context: St. Louis has not finished in the top half of the league in rushing yardage since '01, or in passing yardage since '06.)

Despite the trepidation many associate with taking a running back in the first round, especially an injured one, the Rams need offense, and the draft's two best pass protectors went in the top nine, as did the top two receivers. With St. Louis still holding out hope that 2013's No. 8 pick, receiver Tavon Austin, will develop into a consistent, big-play threat, selecting a rare talent such as Gurley at No. 10, the highest-drafted back since Trent Richardson in '12—was an obvious risk to take.

Much of that risk is related not to Gurley's knee but to the offensive line he will be running behind. Fifth-year-player Tim Barnes, who hasn't started a game since 2013, is battling to take over at center, and on the right side the Rams will probably line up two rookies: right tackle Rob Havenstein, a second-round pick out of Wisconsin, and Jamon Brown, a third-rounder out of Louisville. On the left side St. Louis will rely on able veteran Rodger Saffold at guard and Greg Robinson at tackle; Robinson, the No. 2 pick a year ago, had an uninspiring rookie year and will need to improve to avoid being labeled a bust.

According to Snead, the offensive line is St. Louis's next obsession. For now the group, one of the league's worst, remains the difference between last year's 6–10 record and the playoffs, as new offensive coordinator Frank Cignetti (who was promoted from quarterbacks coach after Brian Schottenheimer's departure to the University of Georgia) installs his zone-blocking scheme. The baseline for improvement is low; last season the Rams allowed an average of 2.9 sacks per game, eighth worst in the league.

Defense ensures short-term respectability. Beyond the line, third-year safety T.J. McDonald is another bright spot; in 2014 he ranked No. 1 at his position in Weeks 9–17, according to the film grades done by Pro Football Focus. Still, the key to crossing the .500 threshold is having an offense that can carry its weight and afford the defense a margin for error that it's lacked in recent seasons. This year, no matter how little daylight their line creates, it's up to Foles and Gurley to provide that opening.

—J.N.

TOM DIPACE

OCT. 18



OCT. 25



NOV. 1



NOV. 8



NOV. 15



NOV. 22



NOV. 29



DEC. 6



DEC. 13



DEC. 17



DEC. 27

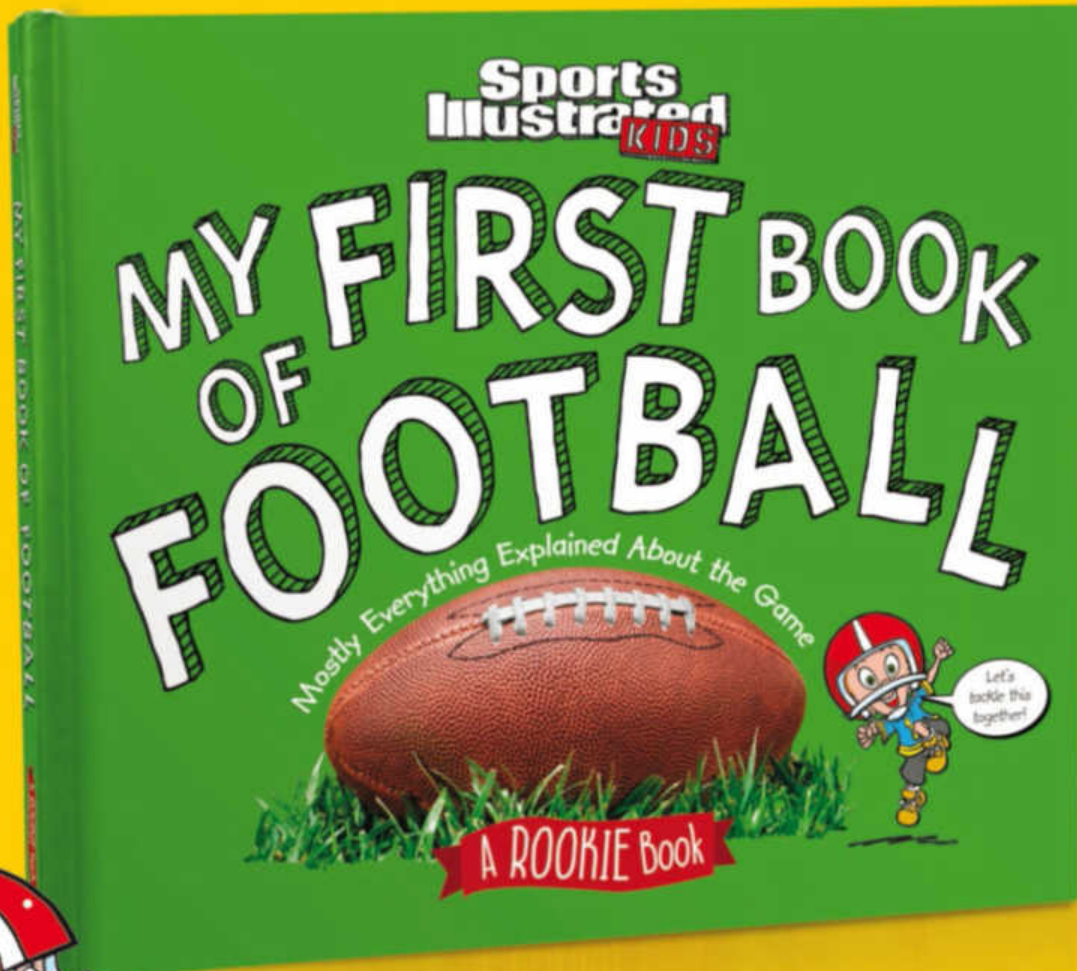


JAN. 3



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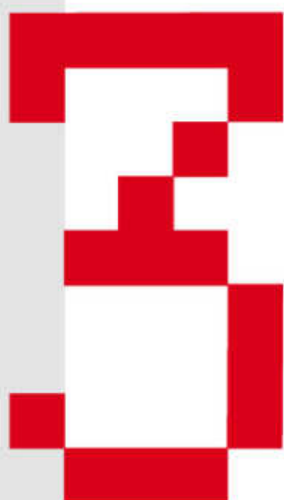
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NFC
WEST

2014
Record:
8-8

San Francisco 49ers



THE DEPARTED

Standing in a corridor at 49ers headquarters before a mid-August practice, Ian Williams did his best to list the ex-Niners gone from last year's squad. When the fifth-year nosetackle was finished, he'd named fewer than half of his old teammates. Then again, Williams had to get to a meeting in 25 minutes. The man was pressed for time. "Losing Crab, Frank, Justin, Ray, Patrick"—wide receiver Michael Crabtree, running back Frank Gore, defensive ends Justin Smith and Ray McDonald, linebacker Patrick Willis—"it weighs on you," said Williams. "But at the same time, you gotta remember we were blessed to have had a few years with them."

Call it Team Silver Lining. So grim have the tidings been out of Santa Clara, so steady the drumbeat of bad news, culminating in the Aug. 6 arrest for DUI of Aldon Smith—the sack artist's fifth arrest in less than four years; San Francisco released him the next day—one might expect to find first-year coach Jim Tomsula

WESLEY HITT/GETTY IMAGES (LEFT); THEARON W. HENDERSON/GETTY IMAGES

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SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
SEPTEMBER 7, 2015

2015 SCHEDULE

SI'S PREDICTION: 9-7

■ HOME □ AWAY

SEPT. 14



MONDAY

SEPT. 20



SEPT. 27



OCT. 4



OCT. 11





FS Tyrann Mathieu

NFC
WEST

2014
Record:
11-5

Arizona Cardinals



RETURN OF THE SWAG

The story of the Cardinals' 2015 season could very well come down to a pair of repaired ACLs.

The owner of the first, Tyrann Mathieu, reports that his knee brace has come off, but it has not been thrown away. After shredding his left ACL late in his rookie 2013 season, the playmaking safety returned to the field in '14 but wasn't himself. "Being instinctive and aggressive are the things I do best," says Mathieu. "Playing with the brace, not really having full confidence in [the knee]—those things took a backseat last year."

Now the famous swag of the Honey Badger is back. Mathieu was a star of Arizona's training camp, cutting, accelerating, disrupting and intercepting with the same panache he displayed as a rookie. The despised brace lives in his locker—"a constant reminder," he says, "of where I was at one point, and where I am now."

The owner of the second, quarterback Carson Palmer, has returned from surgery on his left ACL—

TIM HEITMAN/USA TODAY SPORTS (LEFT); AL TELEMANS FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
SEPTEMBER 7, 2015

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SI'S PREDICTION: 5-11

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necessary after he tore the ligament against the Rams in Week 10 last year—looking *better* than before that injury. Pouring himself into his rehab with the passion and smarts of someone who's been there before (he tore the same ligament eight years earlier as a Bengal, on the first pass attempt of the first playoff game of his career), Palmer healed from that injury more quickly than do many athletes a decade his junior.

As long as he was retraining his body, he told SI in June, he figured he'd set about correcting a minor mechanical flaw that he'd noticed during self-scouting. When scanning the left side of the field, he tended to lean back, his weight on his heels, causing him to throw slightly off-balance.

That burr smoothed, his ligament healed, his body-fat percentage trimmed, Palmer looked dangerously sharp in camp—"Probably the best



THEMMQB.COM INSIDER

ANDY BENOIT ON THE CARDINALS' LETHAL EMPTY SETS

More than ever, offenses are lining up in empty sets, with only the quarterback in the backfield. No team has done this more during the last two years than the Cardinals under Bruce Arians—at least, that's been Arians's M.O. when Carson Palmer (*above*) has been healthy. Going empty requires a nimble mind from your quarterback. With no tailback to provide a run threat or help as an extra body in protection, pass rushers can tee off, and you'll sometimes

notice linebackers checking to a blitz when they see an offense arranged thusly. But obviously the formation would not be gaining popularity if it were without an upside. When an offense lines up empty, it has the ability to spread the field with the maximum five eligible receivers. This forces the defense to spread out, making mismatches more exploitable and coverages harder to disguise. In Arizona's case, these empty formations often feature a 3-by-2

alignment: an intertwined three-receiver route combination on the strong side and a deep-shot route built in on the weak side. That's a very aggressive approach, especially for a team that's only mediocre along the offensive line. Fortunately, Palmer has the progression-read aptitude to make the gamble pay off.

I've ever seen him looking," raves Mathieu. "For him to be rolling out on sprint-out plays, throwing the ball 70 yards downfield, it's really got us excited as a team, to know we got our quarterback back."

"He's lighter, a little more mobile; he's zipping the ball, his arm is definitely stronger," agrees cornerback Jeraud Powers. "Whatever he did this off-season, it worked."

Palmer repeatedly mentions—and demonstrates—an increased comfort level as he enters his third year in Arians's aggressive, push-the-ball-down-the-field, go-for-the-jugular system. After hitting Andre Ellington in stride for a 57-yard catch-and-run in Arizona's pre-season opener against the Chiefs, he described that strike as "a confidence play." Reading the coverage, the quarterback and the receiver made the same sight adjustment. "To pull off the timing of that play probably doesn't happen in Year One or Year Two of the offense. There's a lot of continuity between our guys; guys have played next to each other for a while now, been in this system for a while now."

What of continuity on the other side of the ball? Arians, renowned for his offensive acumen, had long delegated the defense to the highly capable Todd Bowles, who in January took the head-coaching job of the three-ring circus otherwise known as the Jets. In his stead Arians promoted linebackers coach James Bettcher, who has vowed not to stray from the creative, relentless blitz packages favored by his predecessor. Among the reasons the Cards are blitz-happy: They *have* to be in order to generate pressure on QBs. As stifling as this D was in 2014 (18.7 points allowed per game, fifth lowest in the NFL), Arizona undeniably lacks a top-shelf pass rusher.

Last season, though, the D generated a middle-of-the-pack 25 turnovers—and that number is likely to rise in 2015 due to upgrades in the secondary. The team's two most talented defensive backs look markedly better than they did in '14. Quarterbacks throwing in cornerback Patrick Peterson's direction had a 64.8 passer rating in '12. Last season that number spiked to 97.0. Consider, though: It was early in the '14 season that Peterson learned he suffered from type 2 diabetes, which had caused him to gain weight. Listed at 219 pounds last year, he appears to be at least 10 pounds lighter, leading him to describe himself as "rejuvenated."

The same can be said of the Honey Badger, whose ball-hawking skills are as singular as his versatility: He can play every secondary position, including slot corner. That flexibility will make life easier for Bettcher. But in this division—the Rams are underrated, the 49ers' demise is overblown—that won't be enough. —A.M.

OCT. 18	OCT. 26	NOV. 1	NOV. 8	NOV. 15	NOV. 22	NOV. 29	DEC. 6	DEC. 10	DEC. 20	DEC. 27	JAN. 3
PIT L	BAL L	CLE L	BYE	SEA L	CIN L	SF L	STL L	MIN W	PHI W	GB L	SEA W
	MONDAY							THURSDAY			



TAILGATE READY

Grilling and football are a perfect match. Check out blogger **Mike Lang's** hacks for transforming your pregame fare this fall.



Mike Lang is a police sergeant in Englewood, Ohio, with a passion for grilling and an innovative touch with a set of tongs. He launched his blog, Another Pint Please, in 2006 to cover all things beer and barbecue. He is also an accomplished photographer and contributor to the Weber Blog, using his real-life experience as an outdoor cooking enthusiast to dispense tips and tricks to BBQ fans across the internet. Find him at www.weber.com/blog.

THE START OF FOOTBALL SEASON ALSO

kicks off the culinary sport of tailgating. It's a time of year when grillmasters from across the country take their skills from the backyard to the parking lot. Burgers and brats grilled over an open flame are certainly satisfying, but why settle for the norm? Even if your team is struggling, you can make sure your tailgating comes out ahead with these hacks designed to lead you to victory.

Pregame Prep

Tailgating does not include the creature comforts of home, which makes planning for game day essential. Before any event, I like to create a timeline of what I am grilling and how long it takes to grill. A digital timer is essential when juggling varied amounts of food. It keeps me on target and ensures my meals come off just right.

Prep as much food at home as possible. While slicing skirt steak may seem like simple work, it is far easier in a kitchen with running water. The goal is to eliminate as much busy work at the tailgate as possible. Sort all of the ingredients into disposable containers or sealable plastic bags. Once you hit the parking lot, you'll want to focus on getting food on the grill, not getting food ready for the grill.

Get Sticky

Some foods are perfect for outdoor events. For instance, skewers of meat make a great tailgating meal, as they are simple to grill and only require one hand to eat. Whether you're working with shrimp, chicken or steak, thread the meat onto wood skewers. Season the meat-filled skewers with your favorite rub or marinade and place into gallon-size sealable plastic bags. Once the



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skewers go on the grill and the bag is empty, dump the bag in the trash—one less thing to take home!

Dish Out Dough

If you're looking for something entirely different for your next tailgating experience, turn the parking lot into a pizzeria with a grilled pizza bar. My favorite pizzas are those with dough that's grilled directly on the grates. Depending on how many mouths need feeding, either purchase premade, high-quality pizza dough or make your own at home. Place dough balls into lightly oiled plastic bags, and when you're ready to grill, pop the dough out and work with your fingers until it is flat.

Grill one side of the dough over direct medium heat for two to three minutes, or until the dough starts to rise. Remove from the grill and place the uncooked side on parchment paper. Top the cooked side with your favorite toppings. For a traditional pie, use just tomato sauce, pepperoni and grated mozzarella cheese. For a more rustic approach, try sliced pear and gorgonzola cheese. For the classic Margherita, add tomato sauce, fresh basil and fresh slices of mozzarella. Return the un-

cooked side to the grill, close the lid and grill another two to three minutes. I guarantee it will be some of the best pizza you've ever tasted.

Grill Everything

As much as I love meat, my vegetarian friends need love too. When planning for different palates, I turn toward salad, and since we are talking tailgating, the salad is most definitely grilled. When romaine lettuce is halved and grilled over direct heat, it adds a crisp texture to the leaves and covers the head in a beautiful layer of grill smoke. Top with fresh cracked pepper and slivers of parmesan cheese and even your most ardent meat-eating friends will become fans.

Go Strong by Planking

How about fine dining for your tailgate? I love to grill on cedar planks. They add yet another layer of flavor as they slowly smolder over the heat of the grill and make a fabulous presentation when ready to serve your fellow fans. (Check out my recipe for double-bone, planked pork chops with apple, sage and a cider reduction on the next page.) For a side dish, try planked mashed potatoes. Since this is tailgating, make the mashed potatoes a day in advance at home. On game day, transfer the potatoes to a plank and top with cheddar cheese and crumbled crispy bacon. Grill over direct medium heat until the potatoes are heated through.

Here's a planking tip: Submerge the planks in water the night before the game and remove before leaving the house. The extra time in water keeps them from burning up on the grill and guarantees a smoky flavor.

Don't Dismiss Dessert

The ultimate tailgating feast would not be complete without dessert, and when it comes to the perfect tailgate treat, I make grilled inside-out banana splits. Take an unopened banana and cut a lengthwise slit, but be careful not to slice through all the way. Spread the skin open and stuff with marshmallows, chocolate and walnuts. Grill over direct heat until the peel blackens and the contents melt, approximately 8-10 minutes. Remove

THE PERFECT DESSERT FOR A TAILGATE? INSIDE-OUT BANANA SPLITS, OF COURSE.





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the **GRILL** CRASHERS

**READY OR NOT
HERE THEY COME**



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Bone-in Pork Chops

Bacon BBQ
New York Pork Chops

Basil-Garlic
Porterhouse Pork Chops

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and eat the sweet gooey insides right from the peel. Be sure to make plenty of extras.

Bring the Right Grill

Regardless of whether you prefer charcoal or gas, the key to a perfect tailgate grill is portability and power. You need something small enough to fit in your car or truck, but with enough heat to handle any kind of meal. For me, that means the Weber Q 1200. I've grilled on a Q in every condition and location imaginable. It's handled pizza, wings, steaks, roasts, breakfast, lunch and dinner.

To say it's a workhorse is to sell it short. It's the ultimate tailgating grill, and the numerous color options make it stand out in a crowd. At home I love grilling on my large Weber kettle, but tailgating is more like guiding a stock car through pit road: no time for fussing around. You need to be able to move quickly from setting up your grill, to cooking your food, to packing up so you can watch the game.

With these tips and ideas, your next tailgating adventure will be a success no matter what happens on the field. Grill on!

PLANKED PORK CHOPS WITH APPLE, SAGE AND A CIDER REDUCTION



Serves 2

At home, reduce a bottle of cider by half over high heat. Stir in the apple cider vinegar and remove from heat. Once cool, transfer to a sealable container.

Prepare the grill for a 2-zone medium-heat fire (350° F). Combine the pepper, salt and paprika and rub the pork chops equally with the mixture. Place each pork chop on the plank and top each with 3-4 slices of apple and several sage leaves.

Place the plank over direct heat. Lower the lid and grill for approximately 20 minutes. Move the plank to indirect heat. Brush on the cider reduction. Grill until the internal temperature of the meat reaches 145° F with an instant-read thermometer. Remove from the grill and allow to rest for 5 minutes. Drizzle with more of the reduction and serve.

- 2 double-bone pork chops, 1½ inches thick
- 1 tsp freshly ground black pepper
- 1 tsp kosher salt
- 1 tsp paprika
- 1 apple, sliced into ¼-inch sections
- 2 bunches sage
- 1 bottle apple ginger cider
- 1 tsp apple cider vinegar
- 1 cedar plank (soaked in water overnight)

It's time
to get crashing

FLAVOR IT

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GRILL IT

Grill to an internal temperature
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160°F (medium), with a 3-minute rest

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**BUC
STOPS
HERE**

By the measures and metrics of hard-core fans, David's tackles matter the most in the NFL. And by the league's gauge? Well, that's a little less clear.

NFL

2015
PREVIEW



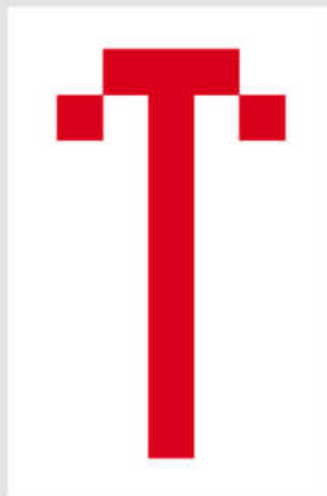
THE FARC OF TACKLE

WRAP YOUR BRAIN AROUND
THIS: WHEN IT COMES TO
THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL
STAT IN FOOTBALL—ONE
THAT DICTATES CONTRACTS,
TRIGGERS BONUSES,
MAKES AND BREAKS
CAREERS—THE NFL IS
ABSURDLY OBLIVIOUS

ENGINE

BY MICHAEL MCKNIGHT

Photograph by Ben Van Hook
For Sports Illustrated



THE ACT OF taking a man to the ground against his will isn't what it used to be. Anthropologists tell us of a time, 9,000 years back, when two Neolithic men engaged in, say, a dispute over land. They would grapple awkwardly with one another about the neck and shoulders until one of them corkscrewed the other to the dirt.

At variance with the swiftness and exactitude of a modern NFL tackle, these bouts—like the ones etched inside the 4,000-year-old Egyptian tombs found at Saqqâra—appeared to consist of prolonged squaring off followed by prolonged hugging. But even as tacklers' collective technique has improved over the millennia, we haven't gotten any better at identifying the individual *winners* of these conflicts, particularly those that are waged during the popular land disputes that play out on fall Sundays across the landmass once known as upper Pangaea.

Anyone with a smartphone (and an abundance of free time) can learn Tom Brady's passer rating. In 2007. On third-and-short. Against a blitz. In cold weather.

But an accurate count of Panthers linebacker Luke Kuechly's tackles last season? That's as hard to nail down as De'Anthony Thomas on a bubble screen. NFL.com and Carolina's website will tell you that in 2014, Kuechly led the league with 153 total tackles: 99 solos and 54 assists. But those numbers are as trustworthy as they are telling—which is to say, not at all—for they contain more judgment calls and flat-out errors than they do tackles for loss. (Kuechly

had just 10 of those in '14, tied for 51st in the league.) The crucial difference is that “tackles for loss” is an official NFL stat, while plain ol’ “tackles” remains unofficial. The reasons for this oddity are many, but they distill to this: A part-time statistician peering through binoculars from a less than optimally positioned skybox, trying to determine which superfast defensive ant just tackled that darting offensive ant, without the benefit of a replay, might have an easier time running out and making an NFL tackle himself.

Was there one tackler? Two? The computer system in a stats crew’s cubicle doesn’t allow there to be three, even though there are dozens of instances each Sunday when three men appear equally responsible for a stop (or five men, in the case of quarterback sneaks on third-and-inches). Despite all these complications, says one exasperated team p.r. director, “when you go to NFL.com, the guy leading the league in tackles has his picture at the top of the page, next to the QB who’s leading in passing yards.”

It’s not the statisticians’ fault. The NFL’s official recorders of its unofficial stats are asked to perform not only the nonsensical each Sunday, they are also asked to perform the impossible. These good people, laypersons like you and me, hold down day jobs during the week. They get paid anywhere from \$20 to \$70 a game for their work, the NFL capitalizing on the same magnetism that allows the Cowboys to rake in \$29 per head at Jerry World for standing “seats” with no field view. With few exceptions, these statisticians are passionate supporters of the teams that employ them for 10 to 13 days a year. “And they tend to stick around awhile,” says Chris Hoeltge, the NFL official in charge of reviewing their work and entering it into the record. “If you can get one of those spots, you stay around for a long time.”

On fall Sunday evenings, as Hoeltge’s staff in New York City collects the dozen or more so-called “game books” from the afternoon’s completed contests—filled margin-to-margin with stats of every shape and relevance—the process of crediting tackles has only just begun. Team p.r. departments, position coaches and quality-control coaches will have a say in who ends up with official tackle credit on a handful of plays. Players themselves log their complaints with a position coach or p.r. flack. It’s yet another reason for the rampant inaccuracy in recording one of the game’s two most fundamental undertakings (blocking being the other, according to Lombardi), an act that the ancient Greeks did just fine recording with hammer and chisel, or papyrus and wet soot.



THE TACKLE, on its own, has debatable merit as a statistic. “The only thing a tackle tells you about the play is who *ended* it,” says Sam Monson, senior analyst at Pro Football Focus, a digital outfit that watches every NFL play and takes its time in recording dozens of facts about each one, including which player(s) made the tackle. “A tackle doesn’t tell you where [it happened], how bad the damage was before the tackle was made, whether the eventual tackler missed three tackles [earlier in the play] or whether he made the tackle five yards in the backfield. There’s nothing to suggest that a guy with 200 tackles played better than a guy with 100. He just made more tackles.”

Chargers free safety Eric Weddle is one of only a dozen or so NFL defenders who combine high-volume tackling (82 solos in 2014) with pinpoint precision (four missed tackles, second lowest among safeties who played 50% of their teams’ snaps, according to PFF). “If a safety has a lot of tackles,” says Weddle, “it could mean you’re coming up and making tackles in the run game, or you’re getting a lot of balls caught on you, or you’re covering for other guys [who missed tackles]. It’s all in the details.”

The statistic becomes even murkier when we consider the biases and judgment calls that inform its tabulation—to say nothing of the outright errors. “I’ve always thought it was funny when a guy ends up with, like, 180 tackles,” says Weddle. “How is that even possible?”

“The league actually credits solo tack-



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and Doug Farrar at
SI.com/podcasts

**“THE ONLY THING
A TACKLE TELLS
YOU ABOUT THE
PLAY,” SAYS
MONSON, “IS
WHO ENDED IT.”**



les pretty reliably,” explains Aaron Schatz, founder of Football Outsiders, an analytics website that among other things monitors inflated tackle stats with diligence. “Assists are where you get the weirdness. That guy jumping on the pile, that’s where the problem is.”

Only two parties seem to care about all this, by the way: hard-core fantasy football players, like Schatz, who participate in IDP (Individual Defensive Player) leagues where solo athletes are drafted instead of entire defensive units; and actual NFL defenders. Both parties are notably vocal in their dismay.

“I think it does need to be looked at,” says Seahawks middle linebacker Bobby Wagner, who, like Weddle, is both prolific and nearly perfect in his work (just seven missed tackles in 99 attempts last year, according to PFF). “Every team has a guy who makes a lot of tackles; and when in doubt, if [the statisticians] don’t know who made a tackle, they just give it to that guy.”

WRAP GAME

Sure, it feels bad to get stood up—but imagine the infuriation of being robbed of a tackle. For David, Wagner and Marshall (clockwise from top), that’s life in the NFL.

Despite Wagner’s first-team All-Pro status and his new four-year, \$43 million contract extension, his modest NFL-tallied totals of 67 solos and 37 assists in 2014 suggest that he is not “that guy” in Seattle. Asked if he’s ever been surprised by the tackle figures next to his name on a postgame stats sheet, Wagner says, “It happens so often that it’s not surprising. When you have a game where you feel like you had a lot of tackles, that’ll be the game where they short you. Or when you feel like you only had a few tackles, that’s when you end up with 12 or 15. I don’t even pay attention to it anymore.”

Browns inside linebacker Karlos Dansby paid dear attention to it in 2013, when he was playing on a one-year prove-it deal with the Cardinals. “I think it’s some [expletive], personally,” he told *The Arizona Republic* that fall upon noticing that other players among the league leaders in total tackles had “like 30-some assists, and I got three!”

“It’s frustrating as hell,” Dansby continued. “I’m 10 years in, I’m working too hard, bro, and it don’t make no [expletive] sense. I’m pissed.”

His anger may have been justified. According to Schatz, the Cardinals’ stats crew that year gave out an assist on only 9% of plays in which a tackle was recorded—the NFL’s lowest rate. In 2014 the Jets’ stats crew doled out assists on a whopping 44% of plays, highest in the league, while the Chiefs’ crew did so on only 7% of plays, edging out the Dolphins (8%) for 32nd place.

When we consider the stinginess of Miami’s statisticians (who gave out 58 assists all year) compared with the generosity of Baltimore’s (231), Dolphins linebacker Jelani Jenkins’s 110 total tackles (83 solos, 27 assists) start to look more impressive than Ravens inside ’backer Daryl Smith’s 128 (68 and 60—tied for the most assists in the league). NFL.com, meanwhile, tells us that Jenkins finished 22nd in tackles and Smith 10th.

The world has bigger problems—the armed escalation of those original wrestling matches, for one. But even if there isn’t a new contract or an incentive clause at stake, a linebacker who studies a given play in the film room, hammers it into his mind in position meetings, then sniffs it out on Sunday and fights his way past two 300-pound bodyguards for the privilege of taking Marshawn Lynch’s knee upside his head—that man deserves to have his efforts accurately accounted for somewhere by his own employer, instead of by some league outsider pecking them into his Cheeto-dusted iPad.

Michael B. Poliakoff, author of the seminal *Combat Sports in the Ancient World*, points out that “in addition to their writing and record keeping, the ancient Greeks democratized sport. Wealth, birth, social standing—none of it mattered. And they structured their games so that one man could emerge and say, inarguably: I defeated everybody at this contest.” Surely, then, we can sift through all this partiality and misdirection and

identify the *best* tacklers in the modern NFL. Right?

Schatz does not have Buccaneers linebacker Lavonte David on his IDP team, so it is without favoritism that he declares the fourth-year player the undisputed champion of making important, game-affecting tackles. Pressed for proof, Schatz opens his laptop and says, “Let’s talk about situations. We have a stat called ‘defeats.’ It combines forced turnovers, tackles that prevent third-down conversions, and tackles for loss. David had 23 defeats last year on rushing plays. No one else had more than 17. The year before, he had 24 to lead the league. No one else had more than 20. Nobody makes more run tackles that stop third-down conversions, or are for losses, than Lavonte David.” David racked up those totals last year, Schatz adds, despite missing two games to injury.

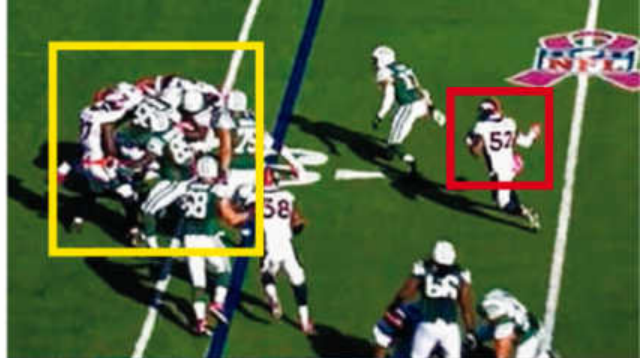
“It all begins with film study,” explains David, a soft-spoken 25-year-old. “You’re trying to learn which play is gonna be run, but you’re also learning who’s accountable for [blocking] you. You try to learn who is accountable for each of your teammates as well . . . so when the play happens, you have a head start on getting to the line of scrimmage, or behind it.”

With this in mind David registered 85 tackles against the run last year. No other linebacker made more than 70. (Raiders rookie Khalil Mack made an impressive 60 run stops, for an average gain of just 1.9 yards—lowest among qualifying players.) A native Miamian, David grew up watching Dolphins’ backer Zach Thomas, who, according to an informal survey of NFL media relations folks, was notorious for analyzing his tackle stats as soon as he could get his grass-stained hands on them. This is not David’s M.O. “I don’t pay attention to solos and assists,” he says. “As far as looking to see whether a guy really made a tackle or not, it’s not something I care about.”

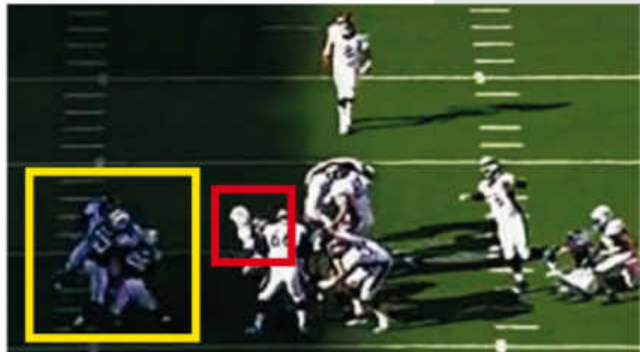
Jene Bramel, a full-time pediatrician and part-time IDP addict who advises other fantasy players at Footballguys.com, points out that in Week 3 last year members of the Patriots’ D were awarded 32 assists at home. The following week, in K.C., they got *four*. Browns players were handed an astounding 50 assists at home in Week 11 (three fewer than the Chiefs’ crew gave out all year), while the visiting Texans were given 12. Hoeltge, guardian of the NFL’s tackle stats, points out in defense of his scorers that Houston ran the ball a whopping 54 times that day, but that still doesn’t account for the 20 or so dubious calls Cleveland’s official scorers made.

Hardly anyone wanted to watch the 4–5 Texans play the 6–3 Browns when that game was shown live last Nov. 16, but here I was, nine months later, analyzing it down to the last frame as I followed along with the

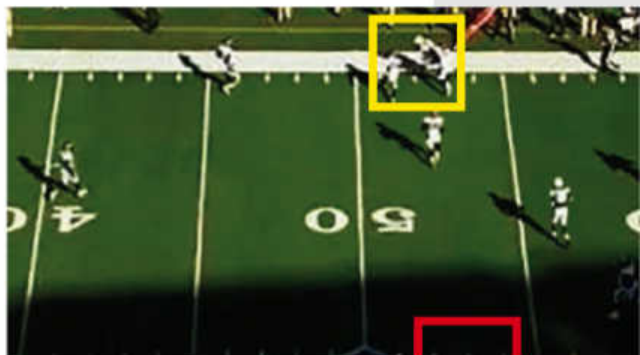
1

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NFL’s official game book. I watched Houston linebacker Brian Cushing loaf in pursuit and get rewarded with a cheap assist on a tackle that strong safety Danieal Manning deserved every bit of. Cleveland linebacker Craig Robertson got an assist for arriving after the ballcarrier’s knee had been forced to the ground by teammate K’Waun Williams. Texans linebacker Akeem Dent whiffed so badly in trying to bring down the shifty Isaiah Crowell that he hopped to his feet in the wake of the play and clapped his hands in self-admonition. He was given a solo tackle for his efforts.

“You have to remember,” Hoeltge says, “each play averages six seconds, and there are 22 guys running around. And generally these [scorers] have a pretty terrible view of the field. Fifteen years ago they were at midfield, but now their boxes have been moved to much cheaper locations. That’s hurt a little bit, especially when the action is on the opposite side of the field.”

This is the system that left Wagner, one of just five members in last year’s “60 Run Tackles” club, tied for 33rd on NFL.com’s total tackles list. “I love Bobby Wagner,” says Bramel. “He’s probably my favorite player. But I don’t start him, because he plays in Seattle [where they don’t pad his stats]. If he was playing in

TAPE DON'T LIE

THREE PLAYS FROM A 2014 JETS-BRONCOS GAME—TRACKED BY THE HOMETOWN JETS' OFFICIAL SCORERS—PAINT A SCARY PICTURE OF HOW TACKLING CREDIT CAN BE MISASSIGNED

1

Classic case of a late-hitting player getting partial credit for the hard work done before he arrived. Broncos LB Corey Nelson (52) was almost five yards off the ball when LB Brandon Marshall, CB Chris Harris and DE Quanterus Smith gobbled up Jets RB Bilal Powell. But Nelson got the last, unnecessary crack on Powell, and in the NFL's game book he split credit for the tackle with Marshall.

2

Similar error: Jets LB David Harris was a good three yards removed from Denver ballcarrier Ronnie Hillman when Hillman got wrapped up by two New York teammates, SS Dawan Landry and OLB Trevor Reilly. Hillman never went down; the play was blown dead as he was stood up by six defenders. Confoundingly, Harris was singled out for shared credit alongside Landry.

3

Misidentifications like this happen too often. The play ended with Jets TE Jace Amaro being ridden out of bounds on the right sideline by FS Rahim Moore and LB Nate Irving. But full credit for the tackle went to Marshall, who ended up closer to the opposite sideline. Even if Irving's number 56 was mistaken for Marshall's 54 in the sunlight, a glimpse at the film would have cleared this up.

St. Louis or Miami, he'd be a 90 [solo], 20 [assist] guy. In New England he'd be a 100–60 guy.”

Why doesn't the league just uncrumple this car crash? In short, hiring a review team to watch game film on Mondays—just to adjust tackle and assist totals—is neither an exciting nor a cost-effective prospect. Put another way: If it's broke, wait for the complaints to rise above a whisper before you fix it.

A **S DISRUPTIVE** as David's and Wagner's tackles are, only one player at their positions last year ranked in the top five of PFF's two most telling tackling metrics: tackling efficiency, which computes tackles made against tackles missed (like batting average), and run stop percentage, which recognizes players who make tackles more than half the distance from a first down. Broncos linebacker Brandon Marshall was a practice-squad player in 2012 and '13 before an injury to Denver starter Danny Trevathan last summer catapulted Marshall toward a breakout year in which he logged 89 solos, 21 assists and just four missed tackles, according to PFF.

“Funny thing is, tackling wasn't my strong suit in college,” says Marshall, a four-year starter at Nevada-

Reno. “Even though I'd end up with 100 tackles, I'd still miss a lot, so that's what I worked on: taking an extra step, not being off balance. . . .”

His years of work were rewarded with a single All-Pro vote this past January. “That was the greatest thing. For a guy who got cut three times—I got cut twice in one week in Jacksonville—to be able to say I received an All-Pro vote. . . . Whoever that one person was, I appreciate it.”

Unfortunately, at least one of the 91 solo tackles that the NFL credited to Marshall never happened. In the fourth quarter of Denver's Week 6 road win over the Jets, he was awarded a solo stop on a play in which he wasn't even nearby. At any point. The only explanation is that the scorer confused Marshall's number 54 with the 56 worn by teammate Nate Irving. “Sometimes you see a player who wasn't even on the field get credit for a tackle,” says Bramel. “Those never get changed.” (SI's attempt to reach the Jets' statistician went unanswered; requests of three other teams were declined.)

Another eternal truth of tackling stats: the home cooking that stats crews like the one in Buffalo seem to keep on simmer. “Kiko Alonso was credited with 72 assists in 2013,” says Schatz, referring to the linebacker who has since been traded to the Eagles. “That's the highest total in our database, going back to 1996.” That was the year, of course, that Buffalo's scorers logged more two-man tackles than any crew in the league. “The running joke in our office,” says PFF chief Neil Hornsby, “was that Kiko Alonso was still making tackles last season”—when he didn't play a snap due to an ACL tear in his left knee.

Such favoritism is rarely found in the work of the Steelers' veteran stats crew, which gives out assists at a rate right around the NFL mean: 25%. Crew chief Jim Downey—a sportswriter by trade, so he's no stranger to thankless, undercompensated work—says the hardest part about recording tackles these days is “the tempo of some of these modern no-huddle offenses. It's hard to keep up.” As for those scrums on third-and-inches, when any of six players could be given credit for a stop, Downey says, “that's when I tell Charlie [Wortman, whom the 55-year-old Downey has known since first grade and who has toiled on his crew at every home game since 1985] to just pick a number. . . . Some stadiums, the last guy who stands up from the pile is the player they'll give it to.”

That faint wail you hear? That's the sound of hundreds of players—NFL and IDP alike—screaming and yanking out their hair.

In the end the whole endeavor calls to mind *The Wrestlers*, the famous Greek sculpture from the third century B.C. that depicts two combatants locked in a position—nudity notwithstanding—familiar to any referee arriving at the end of an NFL play. Attributed variously to Myron, Cephisodotus the Younger or Heliodorus, *The Wrestlers* not only fails to identify the winner of the clash—we don't even know who sculpted it. □



Love Handles

→ BY STEVE RUSHIN

RUNNING BACK NICK GOINGS retired from the Panthers after 2008 and defensive end Kenwin Cummings joined the Jets as a rookie in '09, so when the teams played each other in Week 12 of that season, America just missed the collision of Cummings and Goings, because Goings was going as Cummings was coming.

It wasn't the first such pairing to narrowly elude our grasp. Linebackers Steve Ache and Jeff Paine were in the NFL in the same year but not on the same defense, and thus never inspired the Stallone & Van Damme buddy-cop movie *Ache & Paine* that we're still pining to see.

Over 95 years—from Sneeze Achiu to C.J. Ah You—the NFL has supplied us with superior names, and rather amply. (Amp Lee, for instance.) In the 1970s, Raiders linebacker Phil Villapiano played like he had apiano on his back. Jimmy Claussen was not the first quarterback in the NFL named for a brand of pickle, for he was preceded by Mark Vlasic, who played at the same time as Steve Dils. Buccaneers receiver Frank Pillow had soft hands, and he was covered—we can hope—by Falcons defensive back Scott Case.

But that was a quarter century ago, and since then player names have become one of the very best things about the NFL. Ask Kerwynn Williams, to paraphrase a paint commercial. We live in the High Renaissance of Zurlon Tipton, Bacarri Rambo and Michael Hoomanawanui. Brent Qvale makes me kvell. The NFL has never had so many euphonious handles, and indeed, at this present rate of escalation Euphonious Handles will catch passes for the Colts in 2016.

The names are more lyrical and somehow more joyous than they were 40 years ago, the subtle but significant difference between Ray Guy and Dre' Bly. That's not to suggest that today's are the most memorable names in league history. Even early guys, like Guy Early, had great names. With football names, the violent contact of tongue and palate has often mimicked the clashing of pads: Ditka, Csonka, Blanda, Blinka, Datko, Demko, Flacco, Klecko.

George Nock, Tom Wham, Dennis Lick and Richard Dent each brought a violent name to a violent game, as did the insuperable Alge Crumpler. Visco Grgich is the sound

Over
95 years
the NFL
has
supplied
us with
superior
names,
and
rather
amply.
(Amp
Lee, for
instance.)



What's the
best name in
football?

Join the
discussion on
Twitter by
using

#SIPointAfter
and following
@SteveRushin

a running back makes at the bottom of the pile. (All hail Willie Pile, and while you're at it: Walt Heap.)

If the NFL aspires to a Biblical scale—and trust us, it does—the league is historically well-positioned, what with Ephesians Bartley and Proverb Jacobs. Derrel Gofourth—and multiply. And always follow the Gordon Rule.

But now we have the memorable Barkevious Mingo and Rokevious Watkins, who arrived just previous to Barkevious. If there should ever cease to be a National Football League, let us still maintain a National Foote-Ball League, in honor of Larry Foote and Alan Ball, who play linebacker and defensive back, respectively, in the NFL of 2015, where Texans guard Xavier Su'a-Filo showcases every vowel in his name, plus an X, an apostrophe and a hyphen, a typographical treasure unlikely to be eclipsed.

What could the future possibly hold? The league has seen countless Bubbass (and a single countable Bubby), several Billy Joes (and one Joe Billy) and men whose entire names—first and last—were Billy Joe and Larry Joe, full stop. There have been three Bobby Joes, one Joe Bob, one Bobby Jack, three Billy Rays, at least two Jimbos and two more Jim Bobs, but not—or rather, not yet—a Billy Bob, a Bob Ray or a Jim Joe.

It doesn't pay to take names too seriously. Or too literally. Lemanski Hall is not a dormitory, Fred Land is not a theme park and Ishmaa'ily Kitchen is not a five-star restaurant whose signature dish is eggs Omar Easy.

Likewise, we can't be certain that Jack Bighead was Les Shy than Fred Chicken, whatever their names suggest. What we do know is football is a simple game of cause and effect: Joel Hiitt, so Maurice Hurt.

This is how the game is played. And this is the way the column ends: not with Ben Bangs but Guy Whimper. □



SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (ISSN 0038-822X) is published weekly, with an extra issue in February and skipped issues in January, February, April and July, by Time Inc. Principal Office: Time & Life Building, Rockefeller Center, New York, NY 10020-1993. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and additional mailing offices. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement No. 40110178. Return undeliverable Canada addresses through the UPM process: GST #886381621RT001. U.S. Subscriptions: \$65 for one year, SUBSCRIBERS: If the postal service alerts us that your magazine is undeliverable, we have no further obligation unless we receive a corrected address within two years. Your bank may provide updates to the card information we have on file. You may opt out of this service at any time. POSTMASTER: Send all UAA to CFS. See DIM 7074.12.5. NON-POSTAL and MILITARY FACILITIES: send address corrections to Post Office Box 62121, Tampa, FL 33662-2121. MAILING LIST: We make a portion of our mailing list available to reputable firms. If you would prefer that we not include your name, please call or write us. ©2015 TIME INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. REPRODUCTION IN WHOLE OR IN PART WITHOUT PERMISSION IS PROHIBITED. SPORTS ILLUSTRATED IS A REGISTERED TRADEMARK OF TIME INC. CUSTOMER SERVICE AND SUBSCRIPTIONS: For 24/7 service, please use our website: www.SI.com/customerservice You can also call 1-800-528-5000 or write to SI at P.O. Box 62120, Tampa, FL 33662-2120.